

“Destined to Cooperate”: Japan-ROK Naval Cooperation and its Implications for U.S. Strategic Interests in Northeast Asia

BY SAMUEL J. MUN

The Republic of Korea Navy (ROKN) and Japanese Maritime Self Defense Forces (JMSDF) are “destined to cooperate”¹ in an increasingly competitive security environment in Northeast Asia. Both parties share bilateral security treaties with the United States, prioritize protection of shared sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and face the challenge of addressing the threat of North Korea’s ballistic missile and nuclear weapons program.

These overlapping maritime interests, however, have not led to substantial naval cooperation. From joint-ballistic missile defense to SLOC protection, the strategic benefits resulting from robust ties between the JMSDF and ROKN are widely agreed upon among defense officials in Tokyo and Seoul. But lingering historical disputes over aspects of Japan’s colonial legacy in Korea, along with a territorial dispute over a set of islets (called “Dokdo” in Korea and “Takeshima” in Japan), have impeded the development of a close naval partnership that would further anchor peace and stability in Northeast Asia.

While these disputes have a paralyzing effect on the ability to achieve progress in bolstering security cooperation, North Korean brinkmanship and provocations have demonstrated their value in shaping Japan-ROK security ties. The DPRK sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 indicated that the ROK lacked deterrence against a persistent North Korean threat, leading South Korea to seek greater security alignment with the U.S. and Japan. Trilateral naval exercises have helped to create greater deterrence against the DPRK for a broad array of contingencies that may arise from DPRK provocations.



(Ships from the JMSDF and ROKN with the USS George Washington (CVN 73) in a June 2012 trilateral naval exercise. Photo credit: U.S. Navy)

A third factor is the U.S. strategic rebalance to the Asia-Pacific. The extent to which the U.S. can play a productive role in Japan-ROK defense cooperation will depend on the U.S. ability to uphold security commitments and sustain force structure requirements in midst of defense budget constraints at home. U.S. reassurances and unwavering commitments to Japan and the ROK are prerequisites for fostering Japan-ROK security cooperation within a U.S.-led trilateral framework, but steadily declining ship numbers in the U.S. Navy (USN) may also undermine the long-term Japanese and ROK confidence in the utility of trilateral naval cooperation.

By analyzing Japan-ROK naval ties in relation to the impact of historical and territorial disputes on Japanese and ROK political will to improve navy-to-navy ties, North Korean provocations, and the U.S. rebalance to the Asia-Pacific, this paper will identify opportunities and obstacles for future JMSDF-ROKN cooperation.

Samuel J. Mun is a Research Assistant at Project 2049 Institute. Views expressed here are his alone. The author is indebted to the U.S., Japanese, and South Korean experts whose comments and insights made significant contributions to this paper. Sections of this paper originally appeared in a post on the Project 2049 AsiaEye Blog on January 31, 2014.

It will begin with an explanation of the strategic implications of JMSDF-ROKN cooperation on regional security dynamics, and then follow with an analysis of how common security interests provide compelling reasons for the two navies to cooperate. This analysis will be followed by the last section, in which I assess the potential for greater bilateral naval cooperation in the context of the above-mentioned internal and structural factors, and provide policy recommendations for U.S. decision-makers for enhancing Japan-ROK security and naval cooperation.

Naval Cooperation and Implications for Regional Security

Before examining the beginnings and futures of Japan-ROK naval cooperation, it is necessary to understand the utility and rationale behind bolstering cooperation in the maritime domain. Hyun In Taek argues that “Maritime security cooperation is the most effective way for Korea-Japan security cooperation” because “Unlike army or air force cooperation, maritime cooperation can range from non-military to military” collaboration.² These views were echoed by U.S., Japanese, and South Korean participants at a 1998 trilateral naval cooperation conference, during which participants agreed that Japan-ROK cooperation would provide “unique contributions that naval interactions can make in generating confidence and stability.”³

Besides providing a basis on which Japan and South Korea can strengthen security ties, greater JMSDF-ROKN cooperation in the context of the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship will have several key implications on the Northeast Asian security environment. First, U.S.-Japan-ROK defense cooperation, particularly in the maritime sphere, will create greater deterrence against DPRK provocations and brinkmanship. The sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* in 2010 by a DPRK submarine showed how the DPRK continued to pose an imminent security threat along the littoral of the Korean peninsula,⁴ and DPRK ballistic missile launches have highlighted the importance of integrating naval ballistic missile defense (BMD) platforms among the U.S.,

Japan, and the ROK. Cooperation among the USN, ROKN, and JMSDF in areas such as anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and BMD will further prepare the three countries for future contingencies that may arise from North Korean provocations.

U.S. reassurances and unwavering commitments to Japan and the ROK are prerequisites for fostering Japan-ROK security cooperation within a U.S.-led trilateral framework, but steadily declining ship numbers in the U.S. Navy (USN) may also undermine the long-term Japanese and ROK confidence in the utility of trilateral naval cooperation.

Second, bolstering Japan-ROK coordination bears political utility for addressing regional security and political developments, especially as it relates to shaping China’s rise. For example, in response to China’s demarcation of its air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in November 2013, Seoul and Tokyo decided to conduct a joint search-and-rescue naval exercise with destroyers and helicopters without submitting flight plans to Beijing.⁵ This exercise reinforced South Korea and Japan’s rhetorical rejection of China’s ADIZ.

U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral naval cooperation and exercises will also place greater pressure on China to condemn, rather than defend, DPRK provocations such as the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010. This view was articulated in a statement released after a series of trilateral track two dialogues among representatives from the U.S., Japan, and the ROK, where participants agreed that China’s military modernization and reluctance to censure DPRK for these two incidents required U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral collaboration to “prevent China from engaging in such [assertive] behavior.”⁶ Responding to DPRK brinkmanship and recalcitrance with stronger collaboration among the U.S., Japan, and the ROK will highlight the causative link between DPRK provocations and a greater U.S. military presence in the region. Engaging in sustained trilateral cooperation to deter North Korea can

encourage China to adopt a more cooperative stance on addressing security issues related to North Korea, particularly in order to avoid drawing a greater U.S. military presence into the region.

Third, cooperation among the USN, JMSDF, and ROKN will help create trust between Japan and South Korea to avoid mutual suspicion of each other's naval developments. According to Michael J. Green, from a U.S. perspective, such confidence-building and greater transparency between Japan and South Korea benefits U.S. strategic interests "so that the modernization of the two alliances does not lead the two sides to develop force structures that are redundant and—at worst—destabilizing sources of mutual mistrust."⁷ Without a clearly articulated purpose, Japanese and South Korean development of naval capabilities will only exacerbate suspicions embedded in their historical animosities towards each other. Taking into account deep-seeded South Korean apprehension towards Japanese remilitarization, Japan-ROK maritime security cooperation will alleviate such South Korean concerns and help prevent both navies from entering an arms race that would undermine regional stability.

Japanese and ROK Naval Experiences in the Korean War

The Korean War and Cold War were formidable experiences that had profound impacts on Japanese and ROK naval development in the postwar era. The ROKN's contributions in the Korean War were limited to coastal operations because it had been established in 1948, only two years before the outbreak of the war.⁸ Japanese maritime forces, on the other hand, possessed valuable naval capabilities and extensive experience in conducting wartime naval operations.

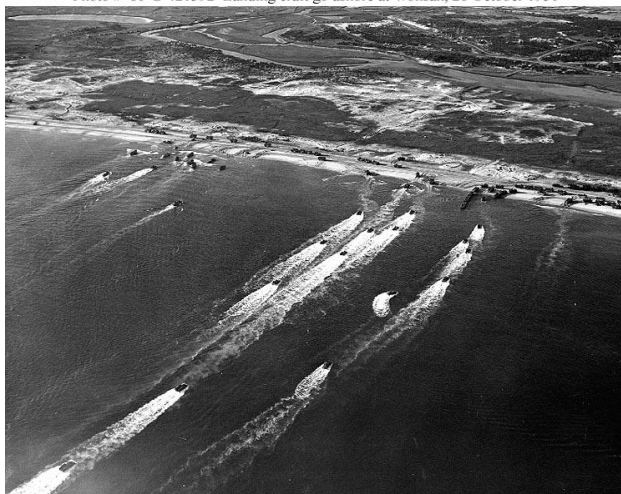
Following the outbreak of the Korean War, the Maritime Safety Agency (MSA), which then-served as the Japanese coast guard and maritime forces, played a key role in providing minesweeping capabilities in waters around the Korean peninsula. After General MacArthur staged a successful amphibious landing at

Inchon in September 1950, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff approved a second amphibious assault to be carried out at Wonsan the following month, but launching the assault required the clearing of mines in the deep waters off of Wonsan. By 1946, U.S. minesweeping forces that were once stationed in Japan were already withdrawn to California, and by 1947, Admiral Chester Nimitz disbanded the Commander Mine Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet (COMINPAC). Only 10 minesweepers remained in the western Pacific at the outbreak of the Korean War, six of which were wooden auxiliary minesweepers and three of which were in caretaker status.⁹

About a week prior to the planned assault, the USS *Pirate* and USS *Pledge* minesweepers were sunk by mines off of Wonsan, after which Rear Admiral Allan E. Smith informed the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), "The Navy able to sink an enemy fleet, to defeat aircraft and submarines...met a massive 3,000 mine field laid off Wonsan by the Soviet naval experts...The strongest Navy in the world had to remain in the Sea of Japan while a few minesweepers struggled to clear Wonsan."¹⁰ Acknowledging the role of competent and capable minesweepers in a successful invasion at Wonsan, then-Rear Admiral Arleigh Burke called upon the MSA to fill this void in UN naval capabilities. Under the leadership of Captain Tamura, the MSA lived up to its reputation as one of the world's most capable and experienced minesweeping forces by clearing mines in the waters around the Korean peninsula, leading 46 minesweepers to clear over 600 square miles between October 2 and December 12, 1950.

Leading U.S. ships through minefields, the MSA suffered several casualties after two of its ships were sunk during operations near Wonsan and Gunsan.¹¹ Japan's thorough and timely provision of minesweeping capabilities therefore paid great dividends for UN operations during the Korean War. Valuable lessons from this historical example are still relevant today based on the likelihood that the DPRK will employ asymmetric capabilities, such as mine warfare (MIW) and ASW, in a contingency to disrupt U.S. and ROK maritime operations in waters around the peninsula.

Photo # 80-G-421392 Landing craft go ashore at Wonsan, 26 October 1950



(First Marine Division landing at Wonsan, North Korea on October 26, 1950. Photo credit: U.S. Navy)

Beginnings of Japan-ROK Naval Cooperation

While Japan's indispensable role in supporting U.S. operations around the peninsula was evident since the Korean War, it was not until the mid-1990s that the JMSDF and ROKN established ties in response to an expanding North Korean security threat. A series of DPRK actions, including a declaration of intentions to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1993, test launch of the Taepodong-1 missile in 1998, and spy boats' intrusion into Japanese waters in 1999, steered South Korea and Japan towards greater security alignment. Defense ministerial and working-level governments began in 1994 after a ROKN cruise training unit visited Tokyo; the JMSDF reciprocated with a visit to Busan in 1996. By 1999, the two navies participated in the first-ever Japan-ROK joint military exercise, which was a search and rescue (SAR) exercise off of Jeju Island.¹²

Parallel security interests were strong incentives for Japan and the ROK to cooperate with each other, but the establishment of such ties was not feasible without broader political efforts from Tokyo and Seoul to strengthen bilateral ties. The Japan-ROK Joint Declaration of 1998 forged between President Kim Dae-jung and Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi was instrumental in resolving contentious disputes

over fisheries surrounding Dokdo/Takeshima, which, if left unresolved, could have otherwise impeded the strengthening of Japan-ROK security ties. In addition to reaching a "basic agreement" on the fisheries dispute, Kim and Obuchi "welcomed the security dialogue as well as the defense exchanges at various levels and decided to further strengthen them."¹³ The Joint Statement also directly addressed the 1998 North Korean ballistic missile launch, over which both Kim and Obuchi "shared the concern and regret expressed by the President of the United Nations Security Council" and "reaffirmed the importance of close coordination between the two countries in conducting their policies on North Korea."¹⁴ Akira Ogawa acknowledges the momentous symbolism of Kim Dae-jung's visit to Japan by contrasting Kim Dae-jung against his predecessor, Kim Young-sam. While Kim Young-sam "utilized domestic anti-Japanese sentiment to shore up his own weak political support," Kim Dae-jung on the other hand, "demonstrated great political courage, citing improved relations with Japan as vital to Korea's long-term security and prosperity."¹⁵ The recognition by Tokyo and Seoul of the need to jointly address common security threats was a critical factor that laid the groundwork for the establishment of navy-to-navy ties.

Japanese and South Korean Defense Reforms: Room for Convergence?

South Korea: Defense Reform Plan 307

More than a decade later, Japan and the ROK continue to face a common security threat in North Korea, and these overlapping interests are manifested in their respective defense reforms in recent years. Following the Korean War, the ROKN focused its development on coastal and amphibious attacks from North Korea.¹⁶ It was only until the mid-1990s and after remarkable economic growth in the ROK that called for sweeping, modernizations to the ROKN. Declaring aspirations to develop a blue water navy to protect SLOCs and ROK commercial vessels, Admiral An Byoung-tae, then-CNO, announced in 1995 ROK preparations for developing an ocean-going navy.¹⁷ President Kim Dae-jung then announced in 2001 that

South Korea's blue water navy would be supported by a "strategic mobile fleet that protects state interests in the five big oceans and plays a role of keeping peace in the world."¹⁸

The recognition by Tokyo and Seoul of the need to jointly address common security threats was a critical factor that laid the groundwork for the establishment of navy-to-navy ties.

In 2005, the South Korean Ministry of Defense (MND) put forth a concrete set of guidelines for pursuing this blue water capability through Defense Reform Plan 2020 (DRP), which proposed expanding ROKN naval personnel from 67,000 to 70,000, and an eight to ten percent increase in defense spending by 2020.¹⁹

While the original purpose of DRP was to reduce the overall quantity of military manpower and weapons systems in the ROK military, nearly all of the planned force reductions were directed at the army rather than the navy. In fact, the DRP included the procurement of more advanced Aegis-equipped surface combat ships, upgrading the submarine force, and strengthening amphibious capabilities.²⁰ Lee Myung-bak also offered strong support for naval modernization, asserting the need to "build a state-of-the-art force that can protect [South Korean] maritime sovereignty," and "ensure the security of maritime transportation lines, and contribute to peace in the world."²¹ These aspirations finally materialized in 2010 in the form of Mobile Task Flotilla 7. Although smaller than the originally proposed strategic fleet, Mobile Task Flotilla 7 possesses power projection capabilities for amphibious and blue water operations, including the ROKS Dokdo LPH (an amphibious assault ship) accompanied by two squadrons. Each includes a KDX-III (the third and latest generation of ROKN Aegis guided missile destroyers) destroyer, and several KDX-II (the second generation Aegis destroyer) destroyers, submarines, and frigates.²²

However, by 2010, the damaging effects of the global financial crisis on the South Korean economy, as well as heightened South Korean

perceptions of a DPRK military threat following the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents demonstrated the need to modify DRP.²³ The revised DRP, or Defense Reform Plan 307 (DR 307), outlines measures for "Proactive Deterrence," and places a greater focus on improving coastal defense through improved ASW capabilities.²⁴ Describing the force posture laid out in DRP 307, ROK Minister of Defense Kim Kwan-jin stated "[i]f the enemy attacks our people and territory, I will use force to punish the enemy to make sure that it doesn't even dare to think about it again."²⁵ While Minister Kim's words seem to show willingness to engage in a war with North Korea, Rhee Sang-woo asserts that "Theoretically, the doctrine precludes an actual war engagement" and that "Credible intimidation" is necessary to "dissuad[e] the adversary from planning provocations in the first place."²⁶

Japan: National Defense Program Guidelines (2010 and 2014)

The "dynamic defense" strategy described in the 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) was motivated by China's rise and external perceptions of Japanese political and economic decline.²⁷ Prior to 2010, the Basic Defense Force Concept (BDF) was the cornerstone of Japanese defense strategy since the Cold War. According to the 2011 East Asian Strategic Review, the BDF Concept "divid[ed] the nation's defense forces into two separate role of 'deterrence in peacetime' and 'response to emergencies,'" and "concentrated on 'how to build' forces," whereas the 2010 NDPG emphasized operational flexibility to allow forces "[to] operate actively and seamlessly in the middle ground between the extremes of peace and military contingency."²⁸

Under Prime Minister Abe's leadership, Japan has since released a 2014 NDPG, maintaining an emphasis on building a "Dynamic Joint Defense Force" for better-addressing "gray-zone" situations involving North Korea and China. While the NDPG places a large emphasis on military operations in southwest Japan to effectively carry out island and territorial defense, it explicitly identifies North Korea and its nuclear and missile development as a "grave

destabilizing factor for the security of the region including Japan and the international community.”²⁹ Furthermore, as part of its defense outlook toward the region, the NDPG states that “Japan will promote a variety of cooperative initiatives” with countries in the region, including “promot[ing] close cooperation with the Republic of Korea (ROK)” and devoting efforts toward “strengthen[ing] cooperative relationships under [a trilateral framework] among Japan, the U.S. and the ROK.”³⁰ Based on the recent defense reforms spelled out in the ROK DR 307 and Japanese 2014 NDPG, the future trajectories of South Korean and Japanese defense posture in Northeast Asia indicate Japan-ROK naval cooperation will continue to bear numerous practical benefits for both countries in the near future.

Three Areas for Cooperation

Interoperability with USN in BMD, MIW, ASW

Shared maritime strategic interests between the JMSDF and ROKN have created ripe opportunities for naval cooperation. Besides sharing respective bilateral alliances with the U.S., Japan and South Korea both have large stakes in ensuring the security of the global maritime commons because of their export-oriented economies and heavy reliance on energy imports. JMSDF-ROKN cooperation will also significantly improve both parties’ interoperability with the USN by coordinating responses to DPRK provocations, and contribute to their respective efforts to hedge against Chinese naval modernization.³¹

North Korea’s SCUD, Nodong, and Taepodong ballistic missiles are an imminent security threat to South Korea, Japan, and U.S. military forces located in the region and make BMD an indispensable military asset in both war and peacetime. Greater BMD cooperation among the three parties will reassure South Korea and Japan of U.S. alliance commitments, while also protect U.S. military forces in East Asia. Also, the U.S., Japanese, and ROK use of Aegis-equipped ships allow the three navies to collaborate in areas such as intelligence collection and sharing, battlefield management C4I, and tactical synchronization.³² Cooperation in BMD would

allow the U.S., ROK, and Japan to effectively “[defeat] any future North Korean missile attack,” which in turn, would “protect vital American military capabilities based in Japan or Guam, minimize the risk that an intentional North Korean provocation could lead to an all-out war, and help prevent Japan from taking independent action in response.”³³ Considering North Korea’s increasingly capable ballistic missile and nuclear weapons program, robust USN-ROKN-JMSDF cooperation through joint BMD is more relevant than ever.

Experts such as ROKN Vice Admiral Jung Ho-sub and retired-JMSDF Vice Admiral Yoji Koda have also stressed the importance of JMSDF-ROKN naval cooperation for mine warfare (MIW) and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) operations.³⁴ The sinking of the *Cheonan* in 2010 by a DPRK submarine torpedo resulting in the death of 46 South Korean sailors demonstrated that the “deterrent effect of the ROK-US combined defense system was somewhat insufficient in dealing with North Korean provocations.”³⁵

Considering North Korea’s increasingly capable ballistic missile and nuclear weapons program, robust USN-ROKN-JMSDF cooperation through joint-BMD is more relevant than ever.

Weak ASW and mine-countermeasure (MCM) capabilities of the ROKN can also hinder U.S. political and military leadership from deploying aircraft carrier strike groups (CSGs) and amphibious readiness groups (ARGs) into the waters around the peninsula during heightened military tensions or wartime.³⁶ JMSDF-ROKN cooperation will allow the JMSDF, with extensive experience in ASW and MCM, to compensate for the ROKN shortfalls in these areas, especially when it comes to defending strategic choke points such as the Korea and Tsushima Straits.³⁷ Therefore, Koda argues, securing SLOCs in the Tsushima Strait in the event of a military contingency on the Korean peninsula will be “indispensable to the ability of both ROK and American forces to fight and

maintain themselves, and to the U.S. alliances with both South Korea and Japan.”³⁸

Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations on the Korean Peninsula

Japan-ROK naval cooperation will also be critical for non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in the event of a crisis on the Korean peninsula. American, Japanese, and South Korean participants at a 1999 trilateral naval cooperation (TNC) conference expressed that TNC would be useful for NEO and refugee rescue operations. According to a Korean participant, the provision of humanitarian aid supplies and the safe evacuation of refugees and U.S. and Japanese nationals from Korea would require extensive logistical coordination among the three navies.³⁹ So long as the DPRK regime attempts to coerce and provoke its neighbors and the U.S. with ballistic missile tests and threats of nuclear war, trilateral naval coordination in NEO will be invaluable toward carrying out a swift and prepared response to instability on the Korean peninsula.

Multilateral Naval Exercises

In the past decade, South Korea’s development of a blue water navy commensurate with South Korea’s increasingly global economic and political interests has allowed the ROKN to play a role in securing shipping lanes and the global maritime commons.⁴⁰ In this regard, the Japanese and South Korean navies can build mutual trust and confidence through joint participation in multilateral naval exercises and operations, such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), Combined Task Force (CTF)-151 operations in the Gulf of Aden, and humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR). Based on my conversation with an official working on trilateral defense issues at the Department of Defense, HADR is a likely area in which the Japanese and South Korean navies can cooperate due to the relatively benign nature of HADR operations.⁴¹ An official from the Japanese Ministry of Defense echoed this logic after asked about the opportunities for Japan-ROK cooperation, stating that cooperation is more feasible in waters distant from Korea and

Japan.⁴² The recent development of South Korea’s blue water capabilities and its growing stake in protecting global maritime commons has made the ROKN a qualified and desirable partner for naval cooperation.⁴³

The Future of Japan-ROK Naval Cooperation with Respect to Three Strategic Coordinates

Obstacle: ROK and Japanese Political Dynamics

In June 2012, only two months after North Korea’s ballistic missile test, South Korea and Japan were on the verge of signing the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) which could have set a new precedent in Japan-ROK security ties. The signing of GSOMIA would have created official channels through which South Korea and Japan could share intelligence on North Korea and formed the first military agreement between the two countries. However, hours before the signing, South Korean officials withdrew their commitment to sign the pact due to South Korean political and public backlash against the nature of the agreement.⁴⁴

Seongho Sheen and Jina Kim identify four factors that prevented the signing of GSOMIA. First, the lack of procedural transparency in drafting the terms of the agreement incited large protest from members of the National Assembly, who claimed that Lee Myung-bak’s cabinet was required to consult and receive approval from the National Assembly. Second, historical and territorial issues, specifically the “comfort women” aspect of Japan’s colonial legacy and Japanese claims over Dokdo/Takeshima, contributed to the South Korean public’s nationalistic response to the agreement. A third factor was South Korean perceptions that a military pact with Japan would antagonize China, potentially putting at risk South Korea’s economic ties with its largest trading partner. Fourth, the fact that presidential elections were to be held the same year made GSOMIA a politically risky move, especially as politicians in both the liberal and conservative camps opposed the agreement due to their shared historical animosities towards Japan.⁴⁵

One month later, in an effort to shore up domestic political support, Lee visited Dokdo/Takeshima and called for an apology from the Japanese emperor for Japanese crimes committed during the colonization period, resulting in a heated exchange of rhetoric between Seoul and Tokyo and inflicting further damage on their political ties.⁴⁶ These tensions had a rippling effect on their naval ties when South Korea denied a Japanese request to dock at Busan in a September 2012 PSI exercise hosted by South Korea. The South Korean Ministry of Defense denied claims of a scheduled JMSDF port visit, stating that the two countries agreed to have the Japanese ship sail straight from Japan to the waters where the exercise was being held.⁴⁷

Based on a conversation with a South Korean expert on Japan-ROK security cooperation, a JMSDF ship flying the Rising Sun flag (once used by the Imperial Japanese Navy) docking at a South Korean port would elicit a harsh backlash by the South Korean public, especially after Japan-ROK ties spiraled downward a month prior.⁴⁸ After asking a former JMSDF official about the impact of this port call denial on JMSDF-ROKN relations, he described how this incident “broke the just-started deepening-relationship between JMSDF and ROKN” and resulted in diminished JMSDF confidence and trust in the ROKN.⁴⁹ These examples of petty tactics certainly undermine the cooperation and confidence building that PSI and multilateral naval exercises are intended to build.

Going forward, the prospects for political reconciliation between Japan and South Korea in the short-term look slim, as Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and ROK President Park Geun-hye have yet to hold a bilateral summit. In Park’s case, her father’s legacy as an authoritarian who once served in the Imperial Japanese Army is an enormous political liability especially among those who were subject to political persecution during her father’s presidency, thus constraining her options to take initiative to improve ties with Tokyo. According to a recent Congressional Research Service report on U.S.-ROK ties, Park has attempted to “bring Japan to a more full-



(Abe Shinzo and Park Geun-hye shake hands in 2006. Photo credit: Asahi Shimbun)

throated acknowledgement and apology for its pre-WWII actions and has linked other aspects of South Korea-Japan relations to the history issue.”⁵⁰

Abe, on the other hand, announced in a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in 2013 that “Japan is Back,” and has pursued his vision for creating a Japan “strong first in its economy and strong also in its national defense.”⁵¹ In addition to promoting the notion of a resurgent Japanese economy and stronger Self Defense Force, Abe’s past remarks second-guessing the definition of Imperial Japan’s “invasion” of neighboring countries, as well as his controversial visit to Yasukuni Shrine (which honors Japanese war dead), have contributed to his poor favorability in South Korea.

While South Koreans understand the strategic imperative of bolstering security cooperation with Japan, intractable disputes over history and territory will continue to remain the greatest impediment to improving Japan-ROK ties.

Following Abe’s visit to Yasukuni Shrine, polling data by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (AIPS) indicated that Abe was no more favorable than Kim Jong-un among the South Korean

public.⁵² Meanwhile, the same public polling data also indicates that 63.9 percent of South Koreans support security cooperation with Japan in face of a rising China, but the territorial dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima was identified as the biggest obstacle to improving ties.⁵³ Such data conveys the notion that while South Koreans understand the strategic imperative behind bolstering security cooperation with Japan, intractable disputes over history and territory will continue to remain the greatest impediment to improving Japan-ROK ties.

Opportunity: DPRK Security Threat

Since the beginning of Japan-ROK naval ties in the 1990s, DPRK provocations have been the primary driver of Japan-ROK security cooperation. More than a decade after the establishment of Japan-ROK N-N ties, the unfolding of the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents in 2010 was another stark reminder of a persistent and imminent DPRK threat, bringing together Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul to bolster trilateral security cooperation. Immediately after the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, for instance, Secretary of State Clinton hosted the Japanese and South Korean foreign ministers at a trilateral meeting in Washington, during which they formed a trilateral statement condemning the attack.⁵⁴ This incident also brought to the fore discussions on areas of Japan-ROK cooperation, such as logistical and intelligence cooperation.⁵⁵

Since 2010, DPRK ballistic missile tests in April and December of 2012 also led to U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral naval cooperation. Two months after the April DPRK missile test, the navies of the U.S., Japan, and ROK participated in exercises “on improving interoperability and communications” to “facilitate cooperative disaster relief and maritime security activities in the future.”⁵⁶ Also, a month after North Korea performed a ballistic missile test (disguised as a satellite launch) in December 2012, U.S., Japanese, and ROK, officials released a joint statement following the annual Defense Trilateral Talks stating that “The United States, the Republic of Korea, and Japan will closely coordinate to deter a potential DPRK nuclear test and to respond to ballistic missile threats.”⁵⁷ In

the near future, so long as historical and territorial disputes remain unresolved between Japan and South Korea, perceptions of an imminent DPRK security threat will likely be the most decisive factor pushing the two countries into greater security alignment.

Obstacle or Opportunity: U.S. Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific

The U.S. rebalance to the Asia-Pacific is a third factor that has a significant impact on the trajectory of Japan-ROK defense ties. The U.S. commitment to increase its engagement with the region and rebalance 60 percent of U.S. naval forces to the Asia-Pacific further anchored U.S. ties with two of its closest allies in the region. In face of North Korean provocations and bellicose rhetoric, the U.S. has taken steps to reassure South Korea and Japan by actively participating in joint-naval exercises and flying B-2 stealth bombers on a practice sortie over South Korea to “provide extended deterrence to [U.S.] allies in the Asia-Pacific region.”⁵⁸ The U.S. flight of B-52 bombers over the Senkaku Islands (and within China’s demarcated ADIZ) during a military exercise without submitting flight plans to Beijing⁵⁹ was another clear and necessary demonstration of U.S. credibility and resolve.

However, while these prompt displays of U.S. military power and presence may seem to reinforce the U.S. role as the anchor of future Japan-ROK security ties, U.S. defense budget constraints are projected to create significant shortfalls in the number of U.S. ships required for maintaining regional stability. According to a Ronald O’Rourke of CRS, the FY2014 30-year shipbuilding plan “does not fully support all elements of the Navy’s ship force structure goal over the 30-year period,” leading to a “projected fleet that would...experience shortfalls at various points in cruisers-destroyers, attack submarines, and amphibious ships.”⁶⁰ Moreover, U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Jonathan Greenert, projected more imminent shortfalls by 2020 in his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the impact of sequestration on national defense:

“One potential fiscal and programmatic scenario would result in a ‘2020 Fleet’ of about 255-260

ships, about 30 less than today, and about 40 less than Navy's PB-14 submission. It would include 1-2 fewer CSG, and 1-2 fewer ARG than today. This 2020 fleet would not meet the [Defense Strategic Guidance] requirements for the mission to Provide a Stabilizing Presence. As a result, Navy would be less able to reinforce deterrence, build alliances and partnerships, and influence events abroad."⁶¹

The U.S. rebalance is a constructive mechanism for reassuring partners and allies, but sequestration figures suggest that the U.S. may not be able to resource it. The rebalance also presents an opportunity to promote U.S.-Japan-ROK naval cooperation; however, diminishing U.S. naval power projection capabilities over the long term may undermine Japanese and ROK confidence in a trilateral framework led by the United States.

Conclusion

While "demons of history," territorial disputes, and domestic political dynamics are clear obstacles to increasing Japan-ROK naval cooperation and security ties, the U.S. can play a productive role in forging Japan-ROK defense cooperation. First, the U.S. should encourage both parties to make a second attempt at signing GSOMIA. Polling data by AIPS at the time of the collapse of the first GSOMIA indicated how unpopular ratings of then-President Lee Myung-bak, rather than the public's attitudes toward Japan, was the reason for South Koreans' rejection of the agreement. Even after Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013, a slim majority, (50.7 percent) of South Koreans supported a signing of GSOMIA.⁶²

In the near future, so long as historical and territorial disputes remain unresolved between Japan and South Korea, perceptions of an imminent DPRK security threat will likely be the most decisive factor pushing the two countries into greater security alignment.

Second, trilateral naval exercises among the USN, JMSDF, and ROKN should be continued and regularized. Trilateral naval cooperation will become increasingly salient for addressing instabilities on the Korean peninsula and China's future posture toward the region. Holding these exercises regularly and expanding USN-JMSDF-ROKN cooperation by designating operational roles and building trust will be a powerful fulcrum through which the U.S., Japan, and ROK can leverage their strategic interests.

Based on this analysis of Japan-ROK security and naval relations in the context of domestic politics, the DPRK military threat, and U.S. rebalance to Asia, it appears that divergent political agendas of Japanese and ROK leadership will be the most significant impediment to improving bilateral ties between South Korea and Japan. Although the possibility for boosting domestic political support to expand Japan-ROK naval ties appears distant, the U.S. must make concerted efforts at encouraging trust and cooperation between the two parties, particularly with a focus on the numerous strategic benefits resulting from cooperation. The extent to which the Japanese and ROK navies are able to interoperate in a contingency will have a tremendous impact on the U.S. role of maintaining peace and stability in maritime Northeast Asia. These strategic opportunities, and benefits of Japan-ROK naval cooperation are significant, and the time to expand this relationship is now.

Notes

- ¹ This phrase was used by Yoji Koda, Vice Admiral (retired) and former Commander in Chief of the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Fleet in “The Emerging Republic of Korea Navy: A Japanese Perspective,” U.S. Naval War College Review, 2010, <https://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/c54ee0a4-987f-4a66-800e-ef88de9381d1/The-Emerging-Republic-of-Korea-Navy--A-Japanese-Pe>.
- ² In Taek Hyun qtd. in Akira Ogawa Jr., “The Miracle of 1998 and beyond: ROK-Japan Security Cooperation,” Korean Journal of Defense Analyses, 1998, p. 32.
- ³ “Trilateral Naval Cooperation: Korea-US-Japan Workshop III,” jointly sponsored by The Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, The Center for Naval Analyses, and The Okazaki Institute, 1999, p. 2-3.
- ⁴ Ryo Sahashi, “North Korea: Why is Seoul and Tokyo Cooperation Necessary,” East Asia Forum, February 9, 2011, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/02/09/north-korea-why-seoul-tokyo-cooperation-is-necessary/>.
- ⁵ Eun-jung Kim, “S. Korea, Japan conduct search, rescue drill in East China Sea,” Yonhap News Agency, December 12, 2013, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2013/12/12/23/0301000000AEN201312122007100315F.html>.
- ⁶ “US-Japan-ROK Nuclear Dialogue Track 2 Statement,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 11, 2011, <https://csis.org/publication/us-japan-rok-nuclear-dialogue-track-2-statement>.
- ⁷ Michael J. Green, “Japan-ROK Security Relations: An American Perspective,” The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 1999, p. 6.
- ⁸ Koda, “Emerging ROK,” p. 15.
- ⁹ James E. Auer, *The Postwar Rearmament of Japanese Maritime Forces, 1945-71* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. 63-64.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- ¹² Ho-sub Jung, “ROK-US-Japan Naval Cooperation,” *International Journal of Korean Studies*, 2012, p. 195, <http://www.icks.org/publication/pdf/2012-SPRING-SUMMER/9.pdf>.
- ¹³ “Japan-Republic of Korea Joint Declaration: A New Japan-Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty First Century,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 8, 1998, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/korea/joint9810.html>.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Ogawa, “Miracle of 1998,” p. 37.
- ¹⁶ Koda, “Emerging ROK”, p. 16-17.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ¹⁸ Terrence Roehrig, “South Korea’s Counterpiracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden,” *Global Korea: South Korea’s Contributions to International Security*, p. 31, http://belfercenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/globalkorea_report_roehrig.pdf.
- ¹⁹ Terrence Roehrig, “Republic of Korea Navy and China’s Rise,” CNA Maritime Asia Project Workshop Two: Naval Developments in Asia, 2012, p. 63, <https://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/DCP-2012-U-002417-Final.pdf>.
- ²⁰ For an overview of the ROK Defense Reform Plan, see Bruce W. Bennett, “A Brief Analysis of the Republic of Korea’s Defense Reform Plan,” RAND occasional paper series (2006): 1-5, http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP165.html.
- ²¹ Lee Myung-bak qtd. in Roehrig, “Republic of Korea Navy and China’s Rise,” 64.
- ²² Roehrig, “Republic of Korea Navy and China’s Rise,” 68.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- ²⁴ Sang-woo Rhee, “From Defense to Deterrence,” CSIS Korea Chair Platform, 2011, http://csis.org/files/publication/110907_FromDefensetoDeterrence_Rhee.pdf; and Roehrig, “Republic of Korea Navy and China’s Rise,” p. 64.
- ²⁵ Kim Kwan-jin qtd. in Rhee, “From Defense to Deterrence.”
- ²⁶ Rhee, “From Defense to Deterrence.”
- ²⁷ Paul S. Giarra, “The Reactions of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force to Evolving PLA Navy Capabilities and Operations,” CNA Maritime Asia Project Workshop Two: Naval Developments in Asia, 2012, p. 52, <https://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/DCP-2012-U-002417-Final.pdf>.

- ²⁸ “Japan: The Adoption of the New National Defense Program Guidelines—Toward a More Dynamic Defense Force,” *East Asian Strategic Review*, 2011, p. 239-240, http://www.nids.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2011/east-asian_e2011_08.pdf.
- ²⁹ “National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2014 and beyond (summary),” Ministry of Defense of Japan, December 17, 2014, http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2014/pdf/20131217_e.pdf.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Michael McDevitt and Catherine Lea, “Workshop Overview,” CNA Maritime Asia Project: Workshop Two: Naval Developments in Asia, 2012, p. 23, <https://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/DCP-2012-U-002417-Final.pdf>.
- ³² Jung, “ROK-US-Japan Naval Cooperation,” p. 203.
- ³³ Christopher Griffin and Michael Auslin, “Time for Trilateralism?” *Asian Outlook*, 2008, p. 5.
- ³⁴ For more information on ASW and MIW in a Korean peninsula contingency, see Ho-sub Jung, “ROK-US-Japan Naval Cooperation,” *International Journal of Korean Studies*, 2012, <http://www.icks.org/publication/pdf/2012-SPRING-SUMMER/9.pdf> and Yoji Koda, “The Emerging Republic of Korea Navy: A Japanese Perspective,” *U.S. Naval War College Review*, 2010, <https://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/c54ee0a4-987f-4a66-800e-ef88de9381d1/The-Emerging-Republic-of-Korea-Navy--A-Japanese-Pe>.
- ³⁵ Jung, “ROK-US-Japan Naval Cooperation,” p. 197.
- ³⁶ Former JMSDF official, Q&A via email, March 2013.
- ³⁷ Jung, “ROK-US-Japan Naval Cooperation,” p. 201-202.
- ³⁸ Koda, “Emerging ROK,” p. 30.
- ³⁹ “Trilateral Naval Cooperation: Korea-US-Japan Workshop III,” p. 17.
- ⁴⁰ Roehrig, “Republic of Korea Navy and China’s Rise,” p. 62.
- ⁴¹ Pentagon official, interview by Samuel Mun, Pentagon, March 11, 2013.
- ⁴² Guest lecture by Japanese Ministry of Defense official, Georgetown University, April 12, 2013.
- ⁴³ Roehrig, “Republic of Korea Navy and China’s Rise,” p. 65.
- ⁴⁴ “S. Korea postpones signing controversial military pact with Japan,” *Yonhap News Agency*, June 29, 2012, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2012/06/29/57/0301000000AEN20120629008900315F.HTML>.
- ⁴⁵ Seongho Sheen and Jina Kim, “What went wrong with the ROK-Japan Military Pact,” *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, 2012, <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb176.pdf>.
- ⁴⁶ Tetsuya Hakoda, “South Korean president turns up Japan heat: Emperor must apologize,” August 15, 2012, http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/korean_peninsula/AJ201208150066.
- ⁴⁷ “S. Korea refuses Japan port call in drill: reports,” *AFP*, September 24, 2012, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iZ9s4AM8-NRZlmtok-cySJ9uke_A?docId=CNG.3ea01502076bc5162e2446438d383b22.601.
- ⁴⁸ Interview by Samuel Mun, Seoul, South Korea, July, 2013.
- ⁴⁹ Former JMSDF official, Q&A via email, March 24, 2013.
- ⁵⁰ Mark E. Manyin, Emma Chanlett-Avery, Ian E. Rinehart, Mary Beth Nikitin, William H. Cooper, “U.S. South Korea Relations,” *Congressional Research Service*, February 12, 2014, p. 21, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41481.pdf>.
- ⁵¹ Shinzo Abe, “Japan is Back,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, February 22, 2013, http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us_20130222en.html.
- ⁵² Jiyeon Kim, Karl Friedhoff, Kang Chungku, and Lee Euicheol, “Korea-Japan Relations in 2014,” *Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, p. 3, February 12, 2014, <http://en.asaninst.org/challenges-and-opportunities-for-korea-japan-relations-in-2014/>.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ Snyder and Byun, “Cheonan and Yeonpyeong,” p. 78.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- ⁵⁶ “U.S. South Korea, Japan to Conduct Naval Exercise,” U.S. Department of Defense, June 14, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=116734>.
- ⁵⁷ “U.S., Japan and Republic of Korea Defense Trilateral Talks Joint Statement,” U.S. Department of Defense, January 31, 2013, <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=15796>.

⁵⁸ American command in Seoul qtd. in Thom Shanker and Choe Sang-hun, “U.S. Runs Practice Sortie in South Korea,” *New York Times*, March 28, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/world/asia/us-begins-stealth-bombing-runs-over-south-korea.html>.

⁵⁹ “U.S B-52 bombers challenge disputed China air zone,” *BBC News*, November 26, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25110011>.

⁶⁰ Ronald O’Rourke, “Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, February 10, 2014, p. 8, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL32665.pdf>.

⁶¹ Admiral Jonathan Greenert qtd. in O’Rourke, “Navy Force Structure.”

⁶² Kim et al., “Korea-Japan Relations in 2014.”