South Korean-Japanese Relations
The American-Japanese-Korea Trilateral Pact

U.S. President Joe Biden holds a joint press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol during the trilateral summit at Camp David, on August 18, 2023. Credit Reuters

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Introduction

South Korea and Japan are important allies of the United States. However, relations between South Korea and Japan are shaky and the United States wants both countries to maintain better relations. There are several reasons why the relations between the two nations are not optimal and there was hope that the Camp David Trilateral Summit was a positive step in the right direction.

From 1910 to 1945, Korea was a colony of Japan. The issue of forced labor and sex slaves and how the victims are compensated remains an important issue. In 2018, a South Korean court ordered Japanese companies to compensate Korean workers for maltreatment and forced labor during World War II. In July 2019, Japan retaliated by removing South Korea from its whitelist of nations that receive fast-track trade approvals for trade and also by tightening export controls on chemicals that are used by South Korean companies to make semiconductors and displays. South Korea filed a complaint with the World Trade Organization and removed Japan from its list of countries with preferred status. This dispute ended when Japan announced that it would reinstate South Korea into its whitelist after the Camp David Trilateral Summit.¹ In March 2023, Yoon ended the South Korean government’s requests for Japanese companies to pay Korean laborers enslaved during World War II. However, there are concerns that this issue might flair up again as there are several more lawsuits in South Korea related to the issue of colonial-era forced labor or sex slaves. Not every victim or victim’s family was involved in the lawsuits and by order of the Korean court, it may lead to more victims deciding to join lawsuits or begin their lawsuits.


Another issue is the territorial conflict over the island of Dokdo/Takeshima/Liancourt Rocks. This is an island that is located in the Sea of Japan and is claimed by South Korea, North Korea, and Japan. The Koreans call it Dokdo while the Japanese named the island Takeshima. Liancourt Rocks was named by French whalers

¹ https://apnews.com/article/japan-south-korea-trade-dispute-export-control-china-f43cf2a0cb43605f6f4626e5985abf7b
when they discovered it while sailing. South Korea currently holds the island and has some military units defending the island. Japan argues that South Korea illegally took the island. In contrast, South Korea argues that Japan took the island during its colonial era and returned with other taken Korean lands. The conflict arises from time to time. Still, Dokdo is a big part of South Korean nationalism and a symbol of Japan's history. This is another issue that the two nations need to solve to be able to improve their relations.

America historically tried to solve the issues between Japan and Korea on several occasions and intervened whenever the conflict between Seoul and Tokyo intensified. However, America, most of the time, uses the logic that communist nations are a common enemy or that the three nations need to defend themselves against a common enemy. While this logic is valid, it ignores the history between the two nations and the legacy of colonialism. A common example used is Germany. Germany does not have many issues with its neighbors regarding World War II. Germany also apologized several times and took steps to ensure its neighbors that it would not do that again. While apologizing is hard, especially on the international stage, where nations rarely apologize for past atrocities, this step might what is needed to solve this relationship issue between Japan and South Korea.

The American-Japanese-Korea Trilateral Pact (JAROKUS) or The Camp David Principles.

The purpose of the American-Japanese-Korea Trilateral Pact was to increase cooperation between South Korea, Japan, and the United States against the threat of Russia, China, and North Korea. The statement called for more collaboration between the three nations and the strengthening of ties among the three nations. The Pact implements a formal casus foederis in which a threat to one member constitutes a threat against all, yet it does not mirror Article Five of the NATO Treaty; a response to an attack against one member must be discussed. The pact also improves trilateral ballistic missile defense and military exercises. The three countries will develop a security framework for the Indo-Pacific region. The Pact also focused on improving Southeast Asian and Pacific Island countries and emphasized the need for regional economic security enhancement. The United States and Japan were very positive regarding JAROKUS, however, South Korea’s reaction was mixed. Some people, including the President of South Korea, saw this move as necessary as China and North Korea are a threat and more cooperation between the democratic nations could be helpful. South Korea is also technically still at war with North Korea as they only signed an armistice and not a peace treaty. Some people are against the idea due to the issues that was mentioned earlier in the paper. In particular, some people argue that South Korea cannot trust Japan until the issues of the past are fixed or healed. The Japan Times poll showed that 44% of South Koreans feel positive toward Japan which is rising

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slowly but still on the lower end out of the surveyed nations.\(^3\) Polls by other news agencies in both Japan and South Korea yielded similar results.

**The Future**

The Trilateral Summit itself was considered a historical event that should be the stepping stone to start a better and healthier relationship between America's two biggest allies in Asia. However, there is an issue that it is possible to sustain.

As you can see, President Yoon's popularity rate has been low for most of his time in office. His stance towards Japan is one of the factors that influence this. One factor was when President Yoon ordered South Korean companies to make and fund a foundation to compensate its victims and also fix the relationship between South Korea and Japan and solve the trade war issue. Another problem was the Japanese decision to release radioactive wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant. The Korean public believes that this should be stopped as they think there is a chance the water is harmful. Being too friendly to Japan is considered political suicide in South Korea, so there is a chance that a new president would want to reverse the deal, especially when it was a controversial decision made by an unpopular president. There is a high probability that the next president will be liberal, and liberal presidents in South Korea tend to be more tough on Japan and historical issues regarding Japan.

Another issue is the United States elections that are coming up. South Korea and the United States had issues under the Trump Administration over the cost-sharing of American troops in South Korea. Trump also talked about pulling out troops from South Korea at one point. If Trump is elected and adopts a similar policy direction, this would be concerning for South Korea. Donald Trump's allies are already reassuring South Korea and Japan that Trump would be supportive, repairing relations and America will help both nations achieve that goal. America should not think that the Camp David Principles would solve these issues outright. America needs to maintain these relationships and ensure the old feud between South Korea and Japan does not flare up again. America also needs to acknowledge and pay more attention to the historical background between these two nations.

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