

Focus: Increasing Uncertainty on the Korean Peninsula and Japan-ROK Relations (Summary)

Essay: The Shifting World Order and the Responsibilities of Japan and ROK

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The liberal international order that humanity achieved at the end of the 20th century has begun to be shaken by the rise of China and its rapid military buildup in both nuclear and conventional weapons, Russia's lawless war in Ukraine, and the "America First" policy of US President Trump.

European nations, sensing that the US commitment is waning, are strengthening their unity through the frameworks of NATO and the European Union. Germany, Poland, and other European countries are taking major steps to bolster their defense capabilities.

As key US allies in Northeast Asia, both Japan and ROK have a responsibility to support the United States and expand the liberal international order in the Indo-Pacific. Even while the US seeks to weaken its commitment to Europe in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, the US is conversely trying to focus on Asia to win the US-China great power competition.

The US-Japan and US-ROK alliances play a greater role than ever in deterring armed aggression by China against Taiwan, which has become an island of freedom, and in deterring North Korea, which has been expanding its nuclear arsenal.

1 The Kim Jong-un Regime's Strong Power Policy and Diplomatic Developments: Strengthening National Defense Capabilities and Reconfiguring the Security Environment

Shunji Hiraiwa (Professor, Faculty of Policy Studies, Nanzan University)

After the de facto breakdown of the second US-North Korea summit in Hanoi in 2019, North Korea sought to prepare for what came next by strengthening its defense capabilities and reconfiguring its security environment. This is what North Korea calls its "new path". Joe Biden, who won the 2020 presidential election against Donald Trump, called on North Korea to negotiate denuclearization, but North Korea did not respond to his invitation and worked instead through its Five-Year Defense Plan to upgrade and refine its nuclear strike capability against the United States. While emphasizing the "New Cold War," North Korea simultaneously enhanced its relationship with Russia, especially in the security field, to counterbalance the growing influence of China as North Korea's sole backer since the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile, President Trump, now back for a second term, has expressed a willingness to negotiate with North Korea as a nuclear power, while the South Korean presidential election that followed the impeachment and removal from office of President Yoon Suk-yeol gave birth to the Lee Jae-myung administration, which seeks to adopt a policy of engagement with North Korea. Under these circumstances, North Korea is likely to seek arms control negotiations rather than denuclearization negotiations to ensure the international community accepts a nuclear-capable Pyongyang as an established fact.

2 The End of the Sixth Republic System? Democratic Trial-and-Error in South Korea

Kan Kimura (Professor, Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies, Kobe University)

Since 1987, South Korea has been regarded as a typical success story of the "third wave of democra-

tization” with its numerous electoral changes of government. Behind this success was an understanding of democracy shaped by the country’s historical background: democracy requires the realization and maintenance of a system of direct presidential elections, and institutional democracy centered on this approach must be supported. Attempts were therefore made to rectify the “divide-and-conquer” approach, sometimes by collusion among political bosses and later by pressure exerted through mass demonstrations.

Thirty-eight years on, however, this common social understanding of democracy has been lost, and neither political bossism nor solutions through demonstrations work anymore. This paper reexamines the path and consequences of democracy in South Korea.

3 The Transformation of ROK’s Middle Power Diplomacy: Coordinating Pragmatism and Regional Strategies

Atsushi Ijuin (Lead Economist, Japan Center for Economic Research)

ROK’s middle power diplomacy has been transfigured under the influence of economic developments, domestic politics, and international affairs. With the aim of making the country a “global pivotal state,” the Yoon Suk-yeol administration sought to join the Group of Seven (G7) and attempted to elevate its middle power diplomacy by such means as having the president attend the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit. In terms of regional strategy, the Yoon administration pursued an “Indo-Pacific Strategy” together with Japan and the US, differentiating itself from the Moon Jae-in administration, which had developed a “New North Policy” and a “New South Policy” with diplomacy vis-à-vis North Korea as its main focus. The Lee Jae-myung administration, the first progressive government in three years, has adopted a “pragmatic diplomacy” approach that prioritizes national interests over ideology and values, but pragmatic diplomacy carries with it the risk of instability. Given the advent of the second Trump administration and its advocacy of an “America First” strategy, the importance of middle-power diplomacy has grown. To keep differing perceptions of international affairs from aggravating circumstances, Japan as a key neighbor must strive to identify common interests with ROK through close communication.

4 The Second Trump Administration and Prospects for Japan-US-ROK Cooperation: Post-Camp David Challenges

Yasuyo Sakata (Professor, Faculty of Global Liberal Arts, Kanda University of International Studies)

Based on the agreement reached at the August 2023 Camp David Summit, trilateral cooperation was reestablished as a framework for both global and Indo-Pacific networks. Although the “Camp David Framework” has now been put in place, the leadership of all three countries has changed in 2024–2025, making the future of trilateral cooperation uncertain. The US-Japan-ROK trilateral framework is maintained for now, but challenges are emerging. The largest variable, the US under the second-term Trump administration (inaugurated in January 2025) has selectively carried over the Camp David framework and reconfigured it into a Trump version of an “America First” partnership. The US sees value of the trilateral framework in its Indo-Pacific strategy, but there remain many issues to be addressed, including tariff talks and economic partnerships, a shift toward defending Taiwan from China, and the North Korea issue. Another variable is ROK, i.e., the progressive Lee Jae-myung administration that took office on June 4. The Lee administration’s foreign and security policies resemble the Kim Dae-jung administration’s internationalism with its “pragmatic diplomacy centered on national interests,” emphasizing US-ROK, Japan-ROK, and Japan-US-ROK relations but seeking a different balance, compared to conservatives, in its relations with China, North Korea, and Russia. With the US and ROK as variables, Japan serves as the “linchpin” in the

US-Japan-ROK trilateral framework. Based on US-Japan and US-ROK alliances, Japan should build stable relations with the ROK. Japanese diplomacy has a significant role to play.

5 South Korea-Japan Economic Relations: Investment, Trade Structure, and Regional Integration

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Since the normalization of diplomatic ties in 1965, bilateral economic relations between South Korea and Japan have undergone changes unparalleled anywhere else in the world. In recent years, these relations have faced further and significant changes due to the rapid expansion of the Chinese economy. As a result, the previously recognized “vertical” relationship has disappeared, with South Korea’s and Japan’s respective relations with China now exerting influence far surpassing that of the South Korea-Japan relationship. Its growing trade deficit with Japan had become a political issue for South Korea, but the fact that this trade deficit has not expanded since 2010 is also meaningful for South Korea-Japan relations.

This paper first employs growth accounting methods to demonstrate the significant role played by Japanese capital in South Korea’s industrialization. It then uses Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) indices and the Export Similarity Index (ESI) from 2000 to 2023 to confirm that structural changes in China have brought about noteworthy changes in the overall trade structure between South Korea and Japan as well as in trade among the three countries. Furthermore, this paper utilizes International Input-Output Trade analysis to touch on the interdependency of South Korea and Japan within global value chains that include China.

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