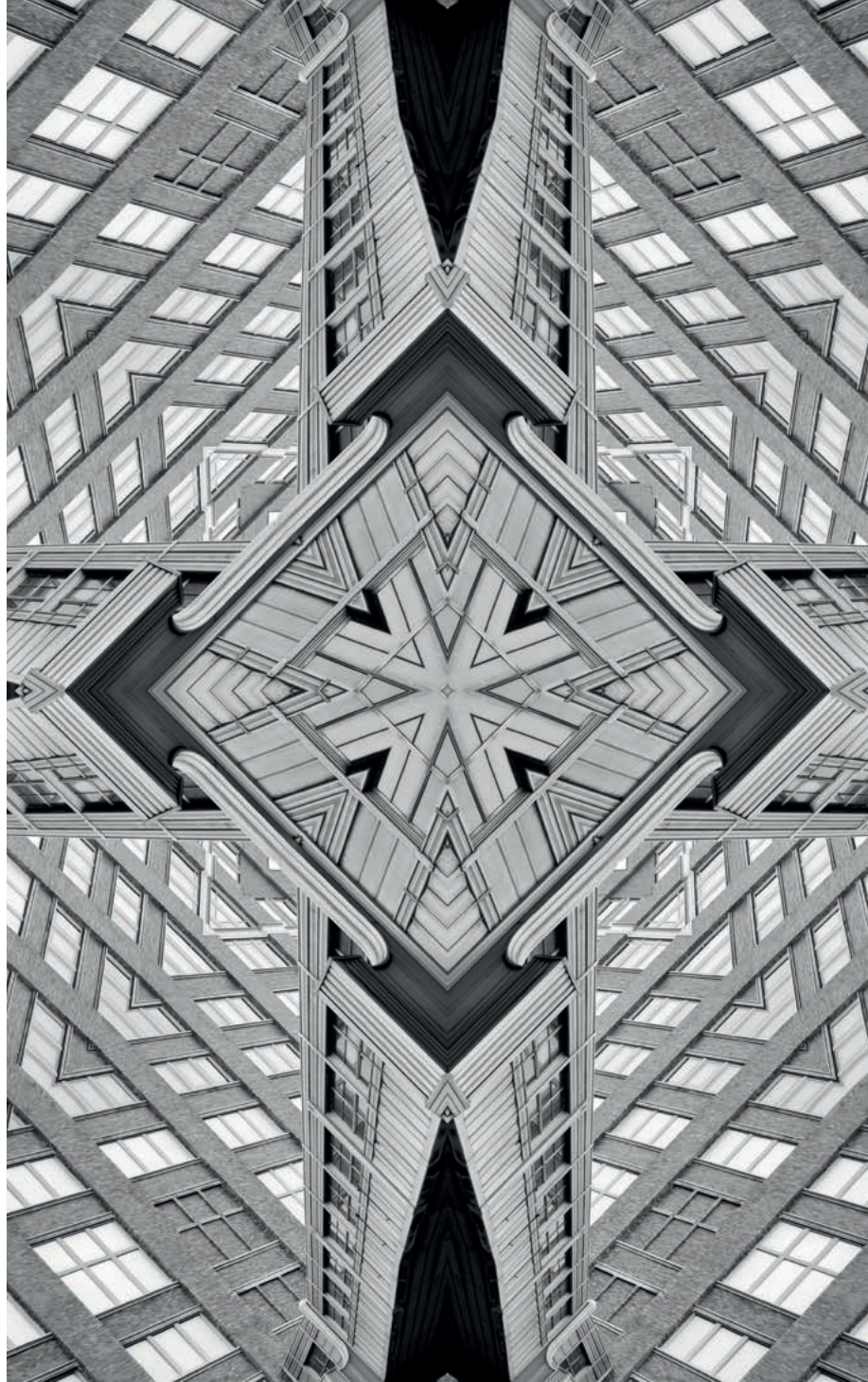


Issue Brief

ISSUE NO. 436
JANUARY 2021



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East Asia's History Wars

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Abstract

This brief examines the historical dimension of the tensions between Japan and South Korea and its implications on the current breakdown in their bilateral relationship. It argues that the battle over historical memory has led to lasting animosity between the two countries, contributing to serious problems in their defence ties and creating space for China to expand its influence in the region. The brief explores why efforts to overcome the historical animosities have fallen short, underlines the threat posed by the tensions to the future of the US security alliance in the Pacific, and outlines the impacts on India's strategy in the region.

Since 2018, the US-led security alliance in East Asia has been in turmoil. Two key players in the alliance—Japan and South Korea—are embroiled in a quasi-conflict that has affected trade, defence and other forms of strategic cooperation. Indeed, the two sides have experienced alternating periods of antagonism, tension and cooperation. While the reasons for this are diverse, perhaps the most important is the complicated and controversial history between the two nations.

In particular, the legacy of Japan's colonisation of Korea from 1910 till 1945 continues to impede progress in their strategic relations. Long after the last shot was fired in the wars they fought against each other, the war over history and memory lingers; the weapons of choice are textbooks, shrines and museums. The first section of this brief gives an account of the history of Japanese colonialism, and then describes the battle over historical memory in the post-war era and its impact on bilateral ties. The penultimate section outlines the strategic consequences of these 'history wars', and the brief concludes with policy solutions.

Despite their geographical proximity, Japan and South Korea have experienced strikingly different historical trajectories. Both countries entered the modern age with stable but insular political systems before being rudely shaken by the arrival of Western powers in the 19th century. Japan, however, was able to adapt its politics to contemporary times and build a powerful Western-modelled army, bureaucracy and constitutional government.¹ Throughout the rest of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Japan affirmed its strength by humbling both China (the traditional hegemon in East Asia) and Russia.² Emulating the great powers of the day, it began to build a colonial empire and exert greater influence in Korea, which had failed to modernise similarly. Eventually, Japan made Korea a colony in 1910; that colonial rule lies at the heart of the current disputes.³

Japan's reign in Korea was characterised by authoritarian rule, suspension of political freedoms, and institutionalised discrimination against locals in government employment, commerce, and other aspects of life.⁴ Further, Japan's conduct in the Second World War, characterised by forced labour in factories and military conscription for hundreds of thousands of Koreans, the coercion of young women to serve as "comfort women" (a euphemism for prostitutes), and other forms of war crimes—continue to evoke visceral reactions among Koreans to this day.⁵ With the end of Second World War, Japanese rule over Korea lapsed. But it is an indication of the brutality of colonial rule and the animosity it generated that it took until 1965 for Japan and South Korea to finally normalise relations.⁶ Unlike the Chinese under Chairman Mao Zedong who underplayed the importance of apologies for the war from visiting Japanese delegations, Korean politics in the post-war years carried strong undertones of anti-Japanese sentiment.⁷

Ultimately, however, the South Korean government's desire to modernise its economy through Japanese investments and technical know-how took precedence over the quest for justice for past wrongs. In the 1965 normalisation treaty, Japan offered over US\$500 million in economic aid in lieu of reparations and agreed to give up any claims over territories in South Korea.⁸ In return, President Park Chung-hee's Korea agreed to settle all claims—individual and governmental—against Japan “completely and finally”.⁹ Crucially, the deal made no specific provisions for Koreans forced into prostitution, labour or military service for Japan, and has been controversial from the moment it was inked.¹⁰

Wars over history peaked in the 1980s. Until then, Japan and South Korea focused on mutually beneficial economic growth and trade cooperation. However, a combination of factors derailed the relationship.¹¹ First, as South Korea and Japan began to experience economic growth, the dependence of the former on the latter declined. While the authoritarian President Park called for a toning down of anti-Japanese rhetoric to access Japanese investments, the beginnings of South Korea's economic independence from Japan came with an increasing desire to reopen historical issues.¹² Second, the 1980s saw a resurgence in nationalism as the economic miracles in both countries helped heal the humiliation of past defeat.¹³ Politicians on both sides tapped into this nationalism and began assertive movements to redefine history.

In Japan's case, politicians sought to memorialise the war and those who fought in it while overlooking Japan's war record.¹⁴ Across the Sea of Japan, South Korean leaders actively attacked symbols of Japanese colonial rule. Finally, both countries now had a generation with little personal experience of wartime hardships.¹⁵ While the wartime generation in Japan had broadly acknowledged the errors of the past, the *shinjinrui* or “new people” increasingly believed that Japan's wars were defensive, aimed at Asian liberation and were not nearly as brutal as their victims (in Korea or China) made them out to be.¹⁶

“The legacy of Japan's colonisation of Korea continues to impede their strategic relations.”

Key Issues in the History Wars

It was in this milieu that the first shot in the “battle of histories” was fired: alterations in Japanese school textbooks. In 1982, Japan’s Ministry of Education called on school-textbook publishers to moderate mentions of the country’s wartime atrocities.¹⁷ The diplomatic repercussions came swiftly as Beijing, Seoul and Pyongyang attacked the Japanese government for historical revisionism. While the nationalist government of Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone backed down by abandoning the textbook reform, the floodgates had been opened and historical issues soon began to seep back into strategic relations.¹⁸ Over the years, conservative Japanese groups have succeeded in getting so-called “patriotic” textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education. While they are rarely used by teacher’s groups, these new school textbooks are part of a larger conservative campaign to control historical narratives in Japan. They continue to evoke much ire in South Korea.¹⁹

Another front in these history wars, perhaps the most famous one, is related to Tokyo’s Yasukuni Shrine. Founded in 1869, Yasukuni Shrine stands as a memorial for those who died in Japan’s wars.²⁰ In the late 1970s, the shrine memorialised 14 Japanese military leaders who had been convicted as Class A war criminals. This event caused a faultline in bilateral relations.²¹ Since the mid-1980s, Japanese prime ministers have visited the shrine despite criticisms from Seoul that such action betrays a lack of respect for the suffering of Koreans at the hands of those who have been found to have committed war crimes.²² Yasukuni became particularly important to bilateral ties in the early 2000s, when then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi began visiting it regularly.²³

Throughout the 1990s, Japan made significant progress in settling historical wrongs with South Korea. For example, the Kono Statement of 1993 acknowledged Japan’s role in the forced prostitution practised during the War. There was also Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama’s acknowledgement in 1995 of Japan’s aggressive war conduct.²⁴ Many Japanese politicians who indulged in historical revisionism faced public outrage in Japan and lost their political positions.²⁵ These developments allowed for Japan-South Korea bilateral ties to improve gradually. High-level security meetings began, and in 1994, a South Korean defence minister visited Japan for the first time since the normalisation of ties.²⁶ After Japan gave a formal written apology for its wartime crimes in 1998, Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and President Kim Dae-jung signed a joint declaration outlining a vision for the Japan-South Korea partnership in the 21st century.²⁷ In 2002, the two countries co-hosted the football World Cup.

“In the 1990s, bilateral ties improved as Japan made efforts to settle historical wrongs with South Korea.”

Key Issues in the History Wars

However, also in 2002, Koizumi raked up the history issue once again through his visits to Yasukuni Shrine. South Korea's president at that time, Roh Moo-hyun, took an aggressive stand on the Dokdo (Korean)/ Takeshima (Japanese) islands' dispute—another front in the history wars. The islands had been taken over by Japan during its colonisation of Korea. With the end of the war and the normalisation of relations, the question of who owned them remained open, with both sides clashing regularly with heated invectives.²⁸ South Korea, in particular, began a nationalist campaign that succeeded in portraying the islands as the “collective heart of the Korean nation”.²⁹ In 2005, a Japanese prefecture celebrated “Takeshima Day” in support of Japan's claim to the islands, provoking massive anti-Japan protests in South Korea.³⁰ Later, Japanese survey ships were poised to reconnoitre the islands when South Korea responded strongly and threatened a “confrontation” if Japan persisted.³¹ While the situation did not escalate, President Roh warned ominously of a “diplomatic war” with Japan.³² As Akihiko Tanaka of the University of Tokyo opined, Japan saw the islands as a “territorial issue and nothing more”; Koreans, for their part, saw it as “another show of Japan not owning up to its past”.³³

The final front in the battle of histories has been the matter of forced labour, and in particular, of Korea's “comfort women”. During World War II, many Korean women were forced into prostitution in service of Japanese soldiers, and subsequently faced abuse and little or no compensation for their suffering.³⁴ In 1993, through the Kono statement, Japan acknowledged its role in the coercion of these women, but argued that any and all wartime claims had been settled in the 1965 normalisation treaty.³⁵ Efforts to compensate victims through independent funds have run into opposition because they do not represent formal reparations from the Japanese government.³⁶ In 2007 Shinzo Abe, then serving his first term as Japanese prime minister, made matters worse when he questioned the basis of the Kono statement and claimed there was little historical evidence to suggest coercion of these women.³⁷ He would later apologise, but after the damage had already been done. Abe's repeated vacillations on the issue of “comfort women” have become symbolic of Japan's perceived insensitivity.

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The History Wars and Strategic Consequences

The Current Trade War

Historical conflicts have now effectively brought back the animosity and tension that characterised the early years of the Japan-Korea relationship. The current breakdown in bilateral relations is intimately connected to history. Japan and South Korea have been feuding since 2018, when the Supreme Court of Korea deemed that two Japanese companies were liable to pay compensation to Koreans forced into labour for these companies during World War II.³⁸ Japan saw this as South Korea violating the 1965 normalisation treaty that settled all wartime claims in perpetuity.³⁹ In a series of moves that many saw as recriminatory, Japan imposed trade restrictions on chemicals essential to South Korea's semiconductor industry and also removed it from its "White List" of countries with access to preferential export rules.⁴⁰ South Korea retaliated by delisting Japan from its own "White List" and has since launched a case before the World Trade Organisation (WTO) against Japanese trade restrictions.⁴¹

South Koreans have also launched targeted boycott campaigns against Japanese companies; they have met with staggering success.⁴² The combined operating profits of 31 Japanese consumer goods companies have dropped by 71.3 percent in the face of Korean boycotts.⁴³ The economic consequences of this trade war, made worse by the COVID-19 since the beginning of 2020, will be dire for both nations. Japan's economy has been experiencing downturns since the 1990s while South Korea has become increasingly dependent on semiconductor exports – now in jeopardy because of Japan's trade restrictions – to drive economic growth.⁴⁴

“The combined operating profits of 31 Japanese consumer goods companies have dropped by 71.3 percent in the face of Korean boycotts.”

The History Wars and Strategic Consequences

The Future of Defence Partnerships

Defence partnerships between Japan and South Korea are also in danger. A 2020 opinion poll in South Korea found that Xi Jinping's China and Kim Jong-un's North Korea enjoy higher public favour than Abe's Japan.⁴⁵ It showed that 70 percent of Koreans had an unfavourable view of Japan.⁴⁶ This is strong incentive for Korean politicians to oppose defence ties with Japan, as was seen in the controversy over the General Security of Military Intelligence Agreement (GSOMIA). In 2016, Korea and Japan concluded the GSOMIA, designed to help both sides exchange information on North Korean activities through the United States.⁴⁷ However, the deal faced significant opposition in South Korea, with Park Jie-won, a prominent leader of the opposition, saying that South Korea "should not give away our classified military information to Japan, which intends to go nuclear. People here still have animosity toward Japan's claim on Dokdo and the issue of comfort women."⁴⁸ South Korean officials were reportedly unsure that GSOMIA would pass muster if negotiated in the public eye.⁴⁹ Despite this, the agreement was signed, but soon ran into trouble in 2019, when South Korea threatened to pull out after its trade war with Japan picked up steam.⁵⁰

As noted earlier, strategic cooperation has also been threatened by the issue of the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands. With the islands now at the centre of nationalist fervour in South Korea, Korean politicians cannot afford to give ground to Japan on resource-sharing or similar diplomatic compromises. South Korea President Lee Myung-bak, who was largely responsible for evolving greater strategic ties with Japan, visited the islands in a show of South Korea's control over them. This provoked an immediate deterioration of ties with Japan.⁵¹ Matters came to a head in 2019 when Russian jets on joint training exercises with China breached the airspace over the island.⁵² With relations already strained due to their ongoing trade war, Japan and Korea hurried to defend the islands and clashed again on the question of sovereignty.⁵³ Reports later surfaced that Beijing and Moscow had allegedly planned the incident to further the estrangement between Tokyo and Seoul.

Even elements of the partnership that were once considered routine have now become uncertain. After decades of strategic freeze, South Korea and Japan began high-level defence ties in 1994 and South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak began a policy of exchanging naval observers and conducting joint naval exercises with the Japanese.⁵⁴ However, in 2018, history reared its head again when the South Korean Navy objected to the flag used by Japanese vessels, as it resembled the standard of Imperial Japan that had colonised Korea. Japan refused to bow to Korean pressure and pulled out of the naval exercises.⁵⁵ It has since become clear that South Korea is unwilling to cooperate with Japan until it reaches a settlement on historical issues. In a meeting with US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel, President Park Guen-hye made clear that security cooperation with Japan would remain limited so long as Japan remained obstinate on historical issues.⁵⁶

The History Wars and Strategic Consequences

Containing North Korea and China

The situation is exacerbated by North Korea's increasing recalcitrance. In 2019, North Korea resumed intercontinental missile testing, over a year after it negotiated a moratorium on missile tests with the US.⁵⁷ What followed was a barrage of missile tests that attempted to display Pyongyang's newly acquired firepower.⁵⁸

Yet the main challenge in the region remains North Korea's patron state: China. In the last few years, China has invested in a root-and-branch modernisation of its armed forces. Much of China's new military capacity has been concentrated on Northeast Asia, with particular focus on the Korean peninsula.⁵⁹ For example, the People's Liberation Army Navy's production of new vessels and the expansion of its marine corps have been concentrated on China's eastern coast that faces the two Koreas.⁶⁰ The marine corps in particular, expected to be 30,000-strong by 2020, is being groomed for expeditionary operations.⁶¹ China's remodelled forces conducted several naval exercises off the coast of South Korea in 2016 and 2017, thereby sending a strong signal as to its operational capabilities should it decide to mount an attack on the region.⁶² South Korea's *Daily Chosun* reported that the Chinese Navy entered South Korea's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) 465 times between 2016 and 2019.⁶³

In 2013, China had displayed its military muscle by unilaterally proposing the creation of an Air-Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), requiring that air traffic and operations through this zone occur only with Chinese permission.⁶⁴ At the time, Japan and South Korea had checked China's move by carrying out joint operations in the proposed zone without prior consent.⁶⁵ Since then, China's nuclear arsenal has also been modernised and expanded, and it appears that Beijing wishes to move from a "modest strategy of minimum deterrence to a more robust strategy of assured retaliation".⁶⁶ The marked decline in Japan-Korea defence ties is thus especially worrying. The GSOMIA, passed after expending much political capital, helped contain North Korea, with Seoul passing along intelligence obtained from assets on the ground and Japan returning the favour with advanced satellite reconnaissance, among other things. However, Korea has made clear that its membership of the GSOMIA is conditional on settling current tensions with Japan, which seem unlikely to abate.⁶⁷ Tensions over history have weakened an already unstable alliance. Outgoing US President Donald Trump has offered to reduce the scale of US-South Korea military exercises in return for Chinese help in freezing North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile tests.⁶⁸ Concerns abound that this move weakens the fighting ability of US-led forces in the region at a time when China has expanded its own.

The History Wars and Strategic Consequences

Japan's Hopes for Increased Strategic Power

Perhaps one of outgoing Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's most important legacies will be his vision of a more strategically muscular Japan. He created a National Security Council, released a new National Security Strategy, and called for constitutional reform to alter Japan's stance of complete pacifism in favour of collective self-defence.⁶⁹ His stance, welcomed by the US and other allies, received less enthusiastic response in South Korea. Part of Seoul's anxiety over Tokyo's impending consolidation of strategic power is historical. Some believe that Tokyo's recent moves are the first steps to the revival of the Japanese militarism that led to the colonisation of Korea and World War II. In South Korea, the mass media covered Abe's strategic power moves as if Japan was planning to become a military superpower again or was reverting to the pre-war order.⁷⁰

Seoul has repeatedly called for Japan to pledge that any expansion in its military role will exclude the possibility of operations in the Korean peninsula.⁷¹ Further, President Park Guen-hye has pushed for the US to disallow the expansion of Japanese strategic power until Japan satisfactorily settles historical issues.⁷² Seoul is worried too that Japan's rising power may upend the balance in the US-Japan-Korea relationship. It fears that an increasingly powerful Japan with the capability to operate regional security missions may prove a more useful ally to the US, effectively crowding Seoul out of the alliance.⁷³

“Seoul has repeatedly called for Japan to pledge that any expansion in its military role will exclude the possibility of operations in the Korean peninsula.”

The History Wars and Strategic Consequences

The Future of the US in Asia

The vitriol generated by the history wars also threatens the US' 'pivot' to Asia and the future of the US-led security architecture in the region. South Korea, in particular, is proving to be the weak link in the alliance. Seoul has been less hawkish on China than Japan and the US, and partly opposes Japan's moves to expand its strategic power as it fears being caught in the middle of an escalating conflict between the US and China.⁷⁴ South Korea resisted joining the US-sponsored Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile defence system as it feared endangering its relationship with Beijing.⁷⁵ Further, South Korea under President Moon Jae-in has been significantly more dovish on North Korea by reviving the peace process after more than a decade of deep freeze.⁷⁶ All of these factors represent a divergence from the US' strategic thinking.

As the US moves to broaden strategic cooperation with Japan, South Korea fears that it may be left out in the cold. As the US seeks to corner China and North Korea through the Quad and other means, South Korea may find itself increasingly estranged from its long-time ally. China understands this fraught strategic equation and has repeatedly tried to woo Seoul. In 2006, Japan's foreign ministry claimed it had evidence that China had approached Seoul to form a common front against Japan in its negotiations for an apology on historical questions.⁷⁷ China has also attempted to threaten Seoul into taking a more neutral stance in the emerging strategic escalation between the US and China. After Seoul agreed to host the US-designed THAAD missile defence system in 2016, China responded by blocking Chinese tourists' visits to South Korea, boycotting Korean products, and launching investigations into Korean companies.⁷⁸

While the US has long chosen to stay out of East Asia's history wars, the growing tensions have lately compelled its involvement. Former US President Barack Obama, for instance, bluntly informed Shinzo Abe that the history wars, aided by conservative leaders like Abe, would only benefit China.⁷⁹ Japanese official visits to Yasukuni Shrine also provoked rare rebukes from the US. However, Washington's hands are tied: If it were to denounce historical revisionism, it might actively provoke backlash from Japan's dominant conservative parties; if it pushes a pragmatic policy that downplays historical issues, South Korea may react with anger. Despite these risks, Washington has intervened, but has found few takers for its mediation.⁸⁰ Leaders in Japan and South Korea profit off nationalist fervour among domestic constituencies and have little incentive to call off the emerging clash. As US Japan analyst Kurt Campbell put it, the history wars have "now emerged as the biggest strategic challenge to American interests in Asia."⁸¹

The History Wars and Strategic Consequences

India's Future in the Region

India's Indo-Pacific strategy in recent years has centred around the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), and in increasing diplomatic investment in security partnerships like the Quad. While the FOIP strategy centres around market economics, rule of law and basic freedom and ostensibly targets no nation, countries like Japan and the US have made both veiled and overt references to China as a roadblock to this vision.⁸² Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar's full support for the FOIP strategy signals that India is increasingly willing to align with a front ready to contain Chinese influence.⁸³ India has also shed its earlier caution on the issue of the Quad security partnership with the US, Japan and Australia.⁸⁴ While India, to accommodate China, had previously resisted inviting Australia to naval exercises and engaging more deeply with the Quad, strategic tensions with China seem to have forced Delhi's hand. Quad countries held their first ministerial level meeting in 2019 and Australia has been given an invitation to participate in the annual Malabar naval exercise with the other Quad nations.⁸⁵ As such, New Delhi has shown its hand on the matter of containing China.

However, the breakdown in the Japan-South Korea relationship threatens India's strategy in the region. First, as pointed out previously, it puts the US-led security architecture under undeniable stress. In the face of China's military muscle, Japanese and Korean unwillingness to set aside historical issues in favour of defence cooperation makes the task of containing China more difficult. Secondly, Seoul's continued opposition to Japan's consolidation of strategic power directly hurts India's interests. With declining US influence in Asia, India will need Japan to step up its security contribution to the Quad, which will be difficult if Seoul continues to pressure the US to block Japan's strategic rise. Thirdly, India has attempted to build closer strategic ties with Seoul. However, India's increasing willingness to confront China and expand partnerships with a rising Japan represents strategic interests that Seoul may not necessarily share. As mentioned earlier, divergence in strategic priorities between the US and South Korea may threaten the future of that alliance and can hamper India's budding partnership with Seoul as well.

“The breakdown in the Japan-South Korea relationship threatens India's strategy in the region.”

Conclusion

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Any temporary settlement of tensions will simply be triage before simmering resentment causes problems to erupt again, unless both sides, to paraphrase historian Caroline Janney, bury the dead and the past along with them.⁸⁶ On the question of history, there are few plausible solutions. The first would be to hand over responsibility for settling historical disputes to civil society groups. Numerous joint historical commissions appointed by the governments of Japan, Korea and China have stalled after years of work when the old gadfly of school textbook reform returned, and the Japanese government refused to teach the new history in schools.⁸⁷

In contrast, civil society has proved more adept at objective scrutiny when working through deeply emotional and controversial historical topics. Indeed, a group of scholars, history teachers and history activists formed the China-Japan-Korea Common History Text Tri-National Committee to investigate historical issues.⁸⁸ Its 2005 book, *A History That Opens the Future*, was a runaway success and sold over 270,000 copies.⁸⁹ Japanese civil society groups like the Asian Women's Fund have long been active in conducting historical research, collecting donations


for comfort women and other groups harmed by Japanese imperialism, and promoting more historical awareness.⁹⁰ Importantly, letting civil society handle the history question allows both sides to save face by backing down while also being seen to have taken positive steps towards a settlement.

Second, both sides will need to be realistic about what is diplomatically possible at this time. South Korea must clearly define what constitutes an apology. In the past, such ambiguity has been at the core of tensions over history. Both the 1965 normalisation treaty and the 1998 apology from Japan to Korea aimed to settle historical issues but were re-opened because strong domestic constituencies rejected these accords. For example, in 2015, Abe and President Park Geun-hye agreed to set up a joint fund to compensate victims of forced prostitution during World War II and settle the issue finally and completely.⁹¹ However, the deal proved politically unpopular for South Korean leaders. Upon assuming office in 2018, President Moon Jae-in dissolved the joint fund and pressed for a fuller apology from Japan, which Prime Minister Abe refused to give.⁹²

“Both sides will need to be realistic about what is diplomatically possible at this time in resolving their historical animosities.”

Conclusion

Quite paradoxically, Moon Jae-In and other South Korean politicians made the situation worse for South Korea when they rejected Shinzo Abe's 2015 deal with President Park. With Abe's deal now dead in the water, many in Japan's dominant right-wing parties may simply lose the appetite to settle historical issues. Not only would the deal expend more political capital but Korea's repudiation of the 2015 deal seemed to confirm the fears of many in the Japanese rightwing, and the public, that Korea cannot be trusted to keep to a final historical settlement. As former Communications Minister Shindo Yoshitaka pithily asked, how could Japan negotiate with a country that "doesn't just move the goalposts but destroys the goal itself."⁹³

While the problem may be seemingly intractable, Korea and Japan are far from being the only nations to share complicated and emotionally charged legacies. Europe was once characterised by many such contentious relationships that led to centuries of conflict. Today, Europe stands as an example of how history does not need to determine the future. 

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