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A CASE STUDY ON KOREA-JAPAN RELATIONS - A REALIST POINT OF VIEW

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Abstract

In this paper, Korea-Japan relations will be examined under a realist perspective. Historical memory in terms of anti-Japanese sentiment is the cause of some fundamental differences between Europe and Asia when it comes to IR theories. No consensus has yet been reached about the bilateral modus operandi of cooperation and conflict in Korea-Japan relations. Under the capability aggression model of alliances, allies value each other for the military assistance they can provide for each other to increase their security. This paper stresses that in the case of Korea and Japan, however, high levels of external threats in terms of the North Korean nuclear threat and the economic and military rise of China have not resulted in correspondingly high levels of South Korean-Japanese cooperation. The historical and territorial controversies are still a huge stumbling-bloc for intensive political and security relations based on mutual trust. Nevertheless, increasing bilateral exchange on the personal-level in terms of tourists, students, and bi-national marriages brightens the prospects of future Korea-Japan relations. This work emphasizes the responsibility of both nations' political leaders to support these trends on the

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Introduction

Theories of international relations (IR) are mostly developed on the basis of experiences of the North-American and European national relationships. In contrast, some psychological factors have fragmented the corresponding relationships among Asian countries for a long time. Historical memory in terms of anti-Japanese sentiment is the cause of some fundamental differences between Europe and Asia when it comes to IR theories (Hwang 2003, pp. 95-108). No consensus has yet been reached about the bilateral modus operandi of cooperation and conflict in Korea-Japan relations.

In this paper, Korea-Japan relations will be examined under a realist perspective. The states are the main actors in realism. Human nature is expected to be fixed and selfish where there is interest rather than ideology. Realists define international relations as a struggle for power to maximize the national interest. The survival and security of the nation state is the preeminent goal. Therefore, national survival is the first and ultimate responsibility for the state leader. In these power-centered relationships, morality and ethics can be positively harmful for achieving this objective. The key difference between domestic and international order is the absence of any higher authority over states.

International Relations and the Realist Theory

In his book, "Man, the State, and War," Kenneth N. Waltz classified three categories or levels of analysis (Waltz 1959). The first is primarily driven by individual actions, which could also be the outcomes of psychological forces; the second is driven by the domestic regimes of states, and the third focuses on the role of systemic factors which are defined by the capabilities of a state. Therefore, what he calls the "anarchical structure" of the third level describes the absence of any higher authority over states. For Waltz, international politics is a self-help system for survival. Realists have a relatively negative perception of cooperation among states because relative gains make it difficult for them to cooperate with each other.

A security dilemma does occur when the military preparation undertaken by one nation creates an uncertainty as to whether it is for defensive purpose or offensive one. Escaping from such a security dilemma necessitates following a balance of power policy. For neorealist scholars such as Robert Jervis, such a security dilemma enables cooperation with others (Jervis 1988, pp. 317-349). The existing world order and peace have resulted from the balance of power politics. International relations are all about bargaining and creating alliances to balance various national interests. This balance is never stable and continuous diplomacy is important, but military means are the last resort. Realism has been the most influential theory during the last 100 years.

Korea-Japan as "Virtual Allies"?

Waltz's neorealist theory was further developed by Stephen M. Walt, who especially explains how states react in terms of external threats (Walt 1985, pp. 3-43). His balance of threat theory

also belongs to the neorealist ideas which emphasize that under high levels of external threats states tend to behave cooperatively and in alignment in order to build a security alliance against their common external threats. Under the capability aggression model of alliances, allies value each other for the military assistance they can provide for each other to increase their security (Hwang 2003). In the case of Korea and Japan, however, high levels of external threats in terms of the North Korean nuclear threat and the economic and military rise of China have not resulted in correspondingly high levels of South Korean-Japanese cooperation.

From a neoclassical realism perspective, which can be described as the third generation of realism, Victor Cha tries to explain the special Korea-Japan relations with his quasi alliance model (Cha 1999). A quasi alliance can be defined as an indirect relationship between two states with a common great power ally. In this model the common great power ally's security commitments are essential for the two other allies in the triangle. He claims that due to the quasi alliance nature of the security triangle between the United States-Japan-South Korea, abandonment and/or entrapment toward Korea and/or Japan, respectively, affects Korea-Japan relations. In Cha's opinion, the more the United States disengages from the security triangle, the more cooperative Korea-Japan relations become. Therefore, the relations between the "virtual allies" Korea and Japan are determined by the United States' security commitment rather than by external threats. In contrast, Yoon Tae-Ryong claims that the normalization of Korea-Japan relations could only be achieved if the United States continues its engagement policy rather than abandoning its allies (Yoon 2007, pp. 169-205). Realist pessimists argue that the United States has neither the ability to force the two neighbors to cooperate nor that to prevent frictions between them (Park 2009, pp. 247-265). Cha's model can explain the alliance behavior of the weaker states, but it cannot explain or predict the strategic choices between

internal and external balancing if the United States decreases its security commitment toward the U.S.-Japan-ROK alliance.

The Nixon-Doctrine and the South Korean Military Built-Up

As a result of the Nixon-Doctrine, the increasing North Korean military provocation, the removal of U.S. troops from Vietnam in 1975, and Jimmy Carter's subsequent plan for the complete removal of American troops from the Korean peninsula during his presidential campaign, the Republic of Korea started a huge military built-up in the 1970s to strengthen its own security capabilities rather than attempting to develop Korean-Japanese security cooperation.

The United States military personnel in Korea were reduced from 63,000 in January 1970 to 43,000 in December 1971 due to the Nixon-Doctrine (Cha 2000, pp. 261-291). One consequence on the South Korean side was a steady increase in the annual military budget during the 1970s from 299 million US dollars in 1970 to 3706 million in 1980, corresponding to an increase from 3.69 percent of GDP to 5.81 percent, which was one third of total Korean public expenditure (Moon and Lee 2009, pp. 69-99). Building-up military capabilities is considerably slower than developing alliances and markedly more expensive. However, such internal balancing is more reliable than any alliance, and much more geared to the needs of the nation and its national interests. This does not mean that nations such as Korea and Japan should only rely on their military capabilities instead of the U.S.-Japan-South Korea alliance or

a possible bilateral South Korea-Japan alliance. Developing both options is definitely the best way.

The United States' Budgetary Deficit and its Consequences toward Korea and Japan

Because of the constantly high U.S. budgetary deficit, the credit rating agency Standard & Poor has downgraded the United States' credit-worthiness from AAA to AA+. This downgrading of the U.S. credit rating as well as the ongoing aftermaths of the economic crisis will probably maintain higher credit costs on the international financial markets in the foreseeable future. As a result of retrenchments, American troops could be removed from South Korea and Japan as in 1971, when American troops in Japan were reduced by almost a quarter (Cha 2000). A lack of preparation regarding its own military capabilities and the unpredictable future of the U.S. alliance commitment could lead to awkwardness in terms of North Korean and Chinese threats. Regarding the continual increase of Japanese military capabilities since the 1970s, realist optimists are nonetheless convinced that Japan will not attain a global power projection capability without huge additional military armament programs, including the acquisition of aircraft carriers or intercontinental ballistic missiles (Park 2009). Although the Japanese military budget has remained around 1 percent of GDP for the last few decades, in comparison to approximately 5 to 6 percent in South Korea, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces are very strong and well equipped with the latest state-of-the-art weaponry due to the extremely good economic performance of the Japanese economy from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Korea-Japan and the Balancing of China

Depending on the specific nation and the specific threats it perceives or has experienced an adjusted combination of armament and alliance will be the best. Against a Chinese threat, neither South Korea nor Japan alone could balance China. But if the two economically and militarily strong Asian “middle-powers,” in alignment with the United States, were to work together, they would gain a scope of influence. Therefore, strong military capabilities and mutual trust in military alliances with each other will provide further assurance of national sovereignty and economic strength for Korea and Japan in the Northeast-Asian region. Realist optimists like Soeya Yoshihide support this by claiming that Japan has been, is, and will continue to be a middle-power, and therefore Korea can feel comfortable about a Japan with limited strategic purposes (Park 2009). On the other hand, structural realists rather argue that it would be everything but exceptional that economic powerhouses such as Japan transfer their resources to the military arena (Waltz 1993, pp. 44-79).

Korea-Japan Historical Animosity

According to the theory of classical realism, there should be close cooperation between South Korea and Japan over joint security cooperation and foreign policy concerns. Up to now this cooperation has been limited only to the U.S.-Japan-ROK security triangle. The reason for this is that classical realism is determined by rational actors and, therefore, is only geared to national interests such as the security and prosperity of the state. In the Korean-Japanese case,

historical mutual animosity and anti-Japanese sentiment not only distort Korea-Japan relations, but also contradict a classical realism perspective.

The historical and emotional Korean-Japanese relations during the last 60 years can be characterized by mutual distrust and friction, which was mostly whitewashed due to the role of the United States in the security triangle. There has never been a bilateral security alliance between the two Asian nations. Historically, Korea has often been a buffer between China and Japan, because of the Japanese ambition to conquer China (Cooney 2008, pp. 173-192). During the suppression and cruel Japanese colonial rule over the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945 not only was Korean national identity in terms of language, religion and culture harmed, but also one million Koreans were forced into slave labor and 200,000 Korean women were abused as sex-slaves for the Japanese Imperial Army. This difficult historical past between the two nations has defined their bilateral relations after World War II, and prevented diplomatic normalization until 1965 (Cooney 2008).

Contemporary Korean-Japanese Controversies

The negative mutual sentiments have also been transferred to younger generations due to the influence of media and education. Public polls in Korea and Japan show that in terms of their mutual images, South Koreans have a tendency to focus on the Japanese colonial rule while Japanese see the Koreans as too emotional and inferior (Cha 1999). These sentiments are steadily reinforced by Korean-Japanese controversies over history textbooks disputes, visits by Japanese officials to the Yasukuni Shrine, the “comfort women” (sex-slaves) issue, and the

territorial conflict over Dokdo. The escalation of the Dokdo conflict in 2006 revealed the possibility of unwanted and unintended military conflicts between both nations and, therefore, contrasts with the rational expectations of realist optimism. Park argues that Japan is a perilous gambler if the voices of the right-wingers are taken into account, but they do not form a majority in Japan (Park 2009).

The mutual mistrust in Korea-Japan relations resembles the prisoners' dilemma where both nations can achieve the best pay-off by trusting and cooperating with each other, but do not cooperate due to a fear of being deceived by the other. During the colonial rule, Korea already experienced such deception by Japan, suggesting that it is now Japan's responsibility to overcome the prisoners' dilemma by proving its reliability by reflecting honestly on the common past of both nations.

Korea-Japan Economic Cooperation

In contrast to the lack of deep political and security cooperation between Korea and Japan, their economic cooperation is well developed. Korean exports to Japan have been continuously increasing over the years from 44 million US dollars in 1965 to 3 billion dollars in 1980, 12 billion in 1990, 20 billion in 2000, and 28 billion in 2010 (Korea-Japan trade statistics 2011). Japanese imports to Korea have exhibited a similar trend, while continuing to exceed Korean exports to Japan, leading to the Japanese trade surplus with its neighbor. Not only has economic exchange increased a lot, but so has the exchange of tourists and students (Park 2009). The huge number of Japanese students at Korean universities, especially when they are

studying Korean language and culture, supports a positive perspective on future Korea-Japan relations.

Korea-Japan Relations – an Outlook

Despite the well developed economic relationship between Korea and Japan, the political relationship has only made limited progress, especially since the 1990s, while a security alliance between the “virtual allies” only exists indirectly through the US-Japan-ROK security triangle. The historical and territorial controversies are still a huge stumbling-bloc for intensive political and security relations based on mutual trust. Increasing bilateral exchange on the personal-level in terms of tourists, students, and bi-national marriages brightens the prospects of future Korea-Japan relations. The responsibility of both nations’ political leaders is to support these trends on the personal-level by restraining their ideological disputes, and by focusing on pragmatic policies to realize their mutual needs. Such actions may marginalize political extremists on both sides and, due to more intensified Korean-Japanese cooperation; the resulting synergy effects could empower both nations to become strong middle-powers in East-Asia. Therefore, optimism for the future of bilateral relations seems to be appropriate.

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