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# Divergence in Japanese and South Korean defence postures towards China in a Changing East-Asian Security Context

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores why South Korea and Japan have adopted divergent security postures towards China. In other words, why has Japan pursued a more confrontational posture characterized by rearmament and deeper strategic cooperation with the United States while South Korea has maintained more balanced relations with China characterised by deeper diplomatic, military, and economic relations including a mutual declaration of a strategic partnership? I argue that Japan's stance can be explained by three primary factors: territorial disputes over the Senkaku/Daiyo islands, a widening power imbalance, and mutual distrust that casts a long shadow over Sino-Japanese relations. Alternatively, South Korea's stance can be explained by the saliency of North Korean threat, which overrides other security concerns and has pushed it to maintain a close relationship with China due to China's important role in resolving this conflict. I also suggest that South Korea and China's shared historical experience of colonial occupation by Japan may contribute to a generally less antagonistic relationship. The article begins with a brief review of Japanese and South Korean defense postures towards China. This is followed by comparison of both states' defense white papers in relation to the wider security context. The paper concludes with some considerations regarding the potential direction that Japan and South Korea might take moving forward as the regional security environment evolves.

## KEYWORDS:

*Defence posture, Security, Japan, South Korea, China*

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## Introduction

China's rise as a major regional power has induced significant change to the East Asian security context, compelling its neighbours to adjust their strategies in a variety of ways. Japan and Korea have reacted to this changing dynamic differently. Despite sharing many similarities (both states are liberal, East Asian democracies that belong to the US hub-and-spoke alliance system, enjoy the protection of the US nuclear umbrella and share mutual security concerns such as nuclear proliferation and the threat posed by North Korea), the approaches of these two countries to China's rise differ considerably. Why is this the case? What factors explain Japan's posture of rearmament and deeper strategic cooperation with the United States and other allies, and South Korea's posture of more balanced relations with China characterised by greater diplomatic, military, and economic relations including a mutual declaration of a strategic partnership?

In this article I argue that Japan's acute shift towards a firm stance on China can be explained by three primary factors: territorial disputes over the Senkaku/Daiyo islands, a widening power imbalance, and historical legacies that continue to cast a long shadow over Sino-Japanese relations. In the case of South Korea, I argue the saliency of its military priority to contain the threat posed by North Korea has pushed it to maintain a close relationship with China despite a widening power gap, since it perceives China as playing an important role in resolving this conflict. Additionally, I argue that shared historical experience of colonialism with respect to Japan may contribute to South Korea's generally friendlier perception of China.

I begin by briefly assessing Japanese and South Korean defence postures towards China. Following this, I engage in a comparison of both states' defence white papers in relation to the wider security context. I then conclude with some final considerations regarding the potential directions that Japan and South Korea might take moving forward as the regional security environment evolves.

## Context

This paper maintains that Japan has pursued an increasingly assertive posture in reaction to China's rise, but is this actually the case? Easley (2017) assesses changes to Japan's security policy since the end of WWII, arguing that, although fears of a dramatic shift in Japan towards aggressive re-militarization are misplaced, Japan does indeed demonstrate a departure from its historical hardline pacifism. Lande (2018) comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that, while not departing from the central principles of the Yoshida Doctrine, which refers to Japan's grand strategy of non-militarism and economic development outlined by Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru in the immediate post-war era, the Japanese government under Shinzo Abe pursued a more assertive policy which largely continues to this day compared to those of previous governments in response to the perceived Chinese threat.

Scholars have sought explanations for Japan's historic policy shift from the Yoshida doctrine to the more assertive posture under Abe. Smith (2009), who wrote during a period of seemingly improving Sino-Japanese relations, identified five key factors that would prove to be hinderances to Sino-Japanese cooperation. These are: (1) territorial and resource disputes, (2) nationalism and mutual distrust, (3) Taiwan, (4) China's military rise, and (5) the US-Japanese alliance. Upon assessing the trend taken by Sino-Japanese relations in the decade since Smith's (2009) predictions were made, one finds that these developments have largely come to pass, coinciding with a more assertive Japanese security posture. As Lande (2018) corroborates, Chinese military pressure, particularly in relation to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, has proven to be among the strongest motivators for Japan's pursuit of greater militarization and deeper security cooperation with the US. Since Shinzo Abe left office, his successors Yoshihide Suge and the current Prime Minister Fumio Kishida have largely maintained Japan's firm foreign policy towards China. Although Kishida was long considered a moderate voice in Japan's foreign policy sphere, he has hardened his rhetoric on human rights and security concerns with respect to China (Fischetti & Roth, 2021), and has stated that Japan should cooperate with Taiwan and countries that share similar values in response to authoritarian states (i.e. China) wielding more power (Reynolds & Nobuhiro). Since coming to office, Kishida has made several moves to deepen economic and security cooperation with the United States even further due to concerns over China's growing assertiveness (Brunnstorm et. al, 2022; Jiji, 2022).

With respect to South Korea, some scholars attribute its comparatively benign attitude towards China in part to a shared colonial experience with respect to Japan, as well as South Korea's ongoing territorial disagreements with Japan over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets – two factors that, from the South Korean perspective, make China a potentially favourable counterbalance to Japanese remilitarization (Zhao & Qi, 2016). Wiegand (2015) corroborates these factors, arguing that despite changes in the regional balance of power being sufficient enough to warrant deeper cooperation between South Korea and Japan, failure to do so can be attributed to the saliency of the same territorial dispute as well Korea's historical experience as a Japanese colony in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is argued that both these factors put pressures on Korean political actors to be minimally accommodating of Japan lest they face electoral backlash from the citizenry (Wiegand, 2015).

Pivoting to the Chinese-Korean relationship directly, Kang (2009) argues that Korea does not fear China nor sees its interests as threatening or incompatible with its own. He finds that civil Sino-Korean relations can be explained by the mutual desire to prevent North Korean nuclearization, a shared desire for economic growth, and (at the time of publishing) positive views of China among Koreans (13). However, in more recent years, public opinion of China among Koreans has declined, bringing into question the veracity of this argument. On the other hand, South Korea's strategy towards China may more accurately be characterized as 'balanced hedging', which refers to how South Korea has leveraged the military commitment of the United States in order to build a deeper economic and political relationship with China without fearing for its security, thereby allowing it to take advantage of both economic opportunities and the central role that China plays in resolving the North Korean dispute (Kim, 2016; Lee, 2017). However, so-called "puzzling" behaviour by South Korea under the Moon Jae-in Administration that appeared to sometimes conform with North Korean and Chinese interests has led proponents of the hedging interpretation to supplement their arguments with reference to the liberal political ideology of South Korean leadership (Kim, 2021). This would suggest a complex interplay between both the ideological leanings of the ruling leadership and the economic and military balance South Korea is forced to maintain. With the recent election of the conservative and more hardline Yoon Suk-yeol of the People's Power Party to the Presidency, South Korea's hitherto balanced approach of China may change.

Building upon this literature on South Korean and Japanese security posture towards China in the next section, I further elucidate the causative factors for divergence. I engage in a content analysis of the two states' defence white papers. Defence white papers offer consistent timelines of states' changing threat assessments and security concerns, thereby exposing the way in which changes in the regional security environment affect strategy. By understanding the most salient factors driving Japanese and South Korean security posture, policy makers will be better prepared to chart the course that these two vital regional players will take as China continues to assert itself.

## Analysis of Security Postures

### Japanese security posture and Chinese threat assessment

Although competing claims over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands have existed for decades, the most significant escalation took place on September 7th, 2010 following a collision between a Chinese fishing boat and Japanese patrol ships in disputed waters. This incident, which resulted in the Japanese coast guard taking a Chinese fishing boat captain into custody, instigated a major diplomatic row. Following this, Chinese vessels within the disputed waters notably increased, with two government vessels entering in August 2011, another one entering in March 2012, and then an additional four in July of the same year (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MFAJ), 2022). Tensions further escalated in September 2012, when the Japanese government purchased the islands from their private Japanese owners, thereby asserting governments jurisdiction over the territory (McCurry, 2012). China challenged these claims by conducted a surveillance mission of the area (Takenaka, 2012). The frequency of Chinese government vessels entering the region increased dramatically as well, with 68 incidents occurring in the remainder of 2012, and an additional 188 taking place in 2013 (MFAJ, 2022).

Prior to this intensification of conflict, there is little characterization in Japanese defence white papers of China as a major threat. In 2005, Japanese defence white papers (DWPs) speak of China in cautious but relatively benign terms, describing its steady growth and increasing power as a "trend [that] draws attention from other countries in the region" (Ministry of Defense, Japan (MDJ), 2005). Furthermore, the 2010 DWP, released just prior to the flare up the territorial dispute, lacks any explicit accusations of misconduct, although it does criticize the lack of Chinese military transparency (MDJ, 2010).

Following the events in 2010, a perceptible shift in the Japanese threat-assessment of China takes place. The 2011 DWP, for instance expresses concern over the future direction of China's response to "conflicting interests with the surrounding countries, including Japan," describing China's actions as "assertive" (MDJ, 2011). Furthermore, the 2013 DWP, explicitly accuses China of attempting to "change the status quo by force based on its own assertion which is incompatible with the existing order of international law" (MDJ, 2013). Subsequent DWPs have continued to maintain this tone in reference to China, with the 2015, 2019 and 2021 DWPs all reiterating that China is acting in an assertive and coercive manner "inconsistent with the existing international order" (MDJ, 2015, 2019, 2021). The 2021 DWP in particular refers to China's actions as "unilateral and coercive," and specifically describes China's activities surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands as a "matter of grave concern to the region including Japan" (MDJ, 2021). However, despite this harsh language, it falls short of explicitly labelling Chinese actions a "threat", which would signal a desire to preserve a degree of diplomatic restraint.

The general state of tension that exists between Japan and China has induced Japan to strengthen its security relationship with the United States. On April 27, 2015, revisions to the Guidelines for the Japan-US Defence Cooperation were announced, which among other goals, called for the expansion of cooperation

on security issues related to both space and cyberspace, information sharing and security cooperation, and logistics and defence equipment cooperation. Japan has also received reassurance that the Senkaku/Daiyou islands are covered by Article 5 of the Japan-US Security Treaty (Nippon.com, 2021), which states that if an “armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan” were to take place, each Party would be expected to “act to meet the common danger”. Additionally, Japan has been actively involved in rehabilitating the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between itself, India, Australia, and the US with the implicit purpose of balancing Chinese military and diplomatic power in the Indo Pacific (Stacy & Smyth, 2017). Since its revival, the Quad has engaged in several joint military exercises to display resolve.

Japan’s increasingly hardline stance on China should also be considered with respect to wider trends in the balance of power between the two countries. The shift in Japan’s tone towards China in the 2011 DWP also corresponds with China overtaking Japan as the world’s second largest economy. Since then, China’s economy has continued to grow at a fast pace while Japan remains stuck in a state of anemic growth. Furthermore, China has become Japan’s largest trading partner, accounting for over 20 percent of Japanese exports (Nikkei, 2021). Chinese economic growth has corresponded with an increase in military spending, which has been directed towards upgrading and modernizing its forces. Combined with dependence on trade with China, these trends have been received with apprehension by Tokyo and have served to inform policies of greater alignment with the US.

However, growing Chinese power alone is not satisfactory for explaining Japan’s adoption of a hardline posture, as evidenced by the lack of such a trend in South Korea and other regional states. Thus, it helps to consider Japan’s defence posture in relation to historical legacy. Differences in memory regarding the actions of the Imperial Japanese Army during WWII have been a roadblock in Sino-Japanese relations. China maintains assertions of genocide and war crimes and argues that Japan has not adequately acknowledged or addressed these grievances. Consequently, animosity between the two countries and their citizenries remains high (Pew Research, 2020).

This animosity creates a difficult situation for Japan as China becomes increasingly powerful and assertive, as Japan risks finding itself in an Asia dominated by a state that has a long historical memory and bitter feelings towards it. In order to maintain a reasonable balance of power and avoid a Chinese-dominated Asian space, Japan has had little choice but to strengthen its other security relationships and act more assertively to balance Chinese power. In sum, Japan’s security posture towards China has been informed by a combination of factors including the escalation of territorial disputes coinciding with shifts in the regional balance of power, which have been compounded by mutual distrust based on divergent historical memory.

#### Korean security posture and Chinese threat assessment

In contrast with Japan, an assessment of South Korea’s DWPs reveals a different evaluation of China. The 2008 DWP for instance references the upgrading of the two states’ mutual relationship to that of a “strategic cooperative partnership” and describes “rapid progress” in mutual exchanges concerning areas of culture, commerce and defence. It also lays out South Korea’s intention to “continue to facilitate defence exchanges with China and explore new areas of mutual cooperation” in order to build on this progress (Korean Ministry of National Defense (KMND), 2008). Subsequent white papers maintain this tone in describing Sino-Korean relations. The 2014 DWP emphasizes how relations between the two countries have been strengthened with reference to the July 2014 ROK-China summit in Seoul, which laid out a path towards establishing a “mature strategic cooperative partnership” between the two countries (KMND, 2014).

However, a desire for good relations has not stopped an increase in apprehension towards China's rapid rise and a widening power gap. Public opinion of China among South Koreans has reached an all-time low, with nearly six out of ten seeing South Korea and China "as mostly rivals" (Power and Lee, 2021). Furthermore, in 2016 South Korea authorized the installation of the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) missile system on its territory despite extensive protest and the threat of sanctions from China. The missile system was officially intended to "counter the growing nuclear and missile threats from North Korea," but Beijing argued that it would harm China and the region's strategic security interests (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2017). It would appear that the installation THAAD represents a form of "limited bandwagoning" on the side of the US in the face of rising Chinese power and greater South Korean concern thereof (Lee, 2017).

However, analysis of its DWPs reveals that South Korea's top strategic priority and primary security concern revolves around the threat posed by North Korea. The centrality of the North Korean problem takes center stage in driving South Korea's actions. The installation of the THAAD missile system therefore reflects a prioritization of North Korean deterrence over stable relations with China. Although a friendly relationship with China is desired due to the perceived leverage it has over the North, this desire is ultimately subordinate to the adoption of security measures that improves South Korea's defence posture vis-à-vis the North.

In returning to the DWPs, one can identify this delicate balance in action. The 2018 DWP explicitly acknowledges that the THAAD missile system has harmed Sino-Korean relationship and emphasizes active steps that South Korea has taken to restore trust and cooperation. Efforts were also made by the South Korean government to restore its relationship with China despite worsening public opinion. Following Chinese sanctions, South Korean president Moon Jae-in met with Chinese president Xi Jinping to negotiate a settlement. These concluded with South Korea agreeing to "three no's" regarding its future conduct, including no more deployments of anti-ballistic missile systems, no joining of a regional US missile defence system, and no military alliance with the US and Japan (Byong-su, 2017). The willingness to restrict future conduct including with the US in favour of restored relations with China reflects the unique circumstances of South Korea's strategic priorities. The threat posed by the North represents by far the largest security concern for Seoul, and because China is considered a vital player in resolving this issue, it would be against South Korean interests to pursue a strategy of "balancing" that would only serve to alienate China and complicate its ability to leverage Beijing's cooperation. However, South Korea is likewise unwilling to forgo leveraging its extensive military relationship with the United States to build up its defences against the North Korean threat, thus explaining its decision to install THAAD.

Through identifying South Korea's central security concerns, the motivations for its China policy become clear. Just as the South Korean-US security relationship serves primarily to combat the North Korean threat, South Korea's close relationship with China also serves this end. This is exemplified in the 2006 DWP, which describes how "[t]he development of military relations between [China and South Korea] is [...] very significant for the sake of both resolving pending security issues such as the North Korean nuclear issue and for stability and peace of the Korean Peninsula" (KMND, 2006). As the North Korean nuclear threat escalates, South Korea continues to emphasize these same sentiments. The 2018 DWP for instance identifies Seoul's goal of "continuously strengthening strategic communication [and] vitalizing defence exchanges and cooperation at various levels and in diverse fields" in order to reinforce South Korea and China's "strategic cooperative partnership" and "contribute to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia," (KMND, 2018). Thus, although South Korea remains committed to its military alliance with the US, its top priority remains the management of the North Korean threat, and due to China's central role therein, it



is not willing to jeopardize these friendly relations unless doing so proves strategically advantageous vis-à-vis the North.

South Korea's pursuit of cordial relations with China may also be understood with respect to its historical experience as a colonial possession of Japan. Although both Korea and Japan are US military allies and cooperate with the US to that effect, their mutual relationship is heavily strained by disagreements stemming from this difficult history. Disputes over forced labour have recently led to a trade war between the two states and South Korea threatening to terminate a 2016 intelligence-sharing pact with Japan (SCMP, 2019). Although such an outcome was avoided, these events have resulted in a chilling of mutual relations, which is exemplified by Korea's 2020 DWP's downgrading of Japan from the status of a "close neighbour and partner" to merely a "neighbouring country" (Arirang, 2021). Relations with Japan have even declined to the point that public opinion polls have indicated that up to one half of South Koreans would support the North in a war against Japan (Johnson, 2019). Thus, it is reasonable to see how friendly relations with China could serve as a sort of "insurance policy" to counter-balance Japan, especially in the context of Japan moving towards revising its pacifist constitution that renounces the right to wage war (Kyodo, 2021).

However, the election of Yoon Suk-yeol signals a possible reversal of this trend and a shift towards a more hardline stance. Yoon, who won election with a narrow margin of only 0.8 percentage points against the Democratic Party opposition and successor of Moon Jae-in, Lee Jae-myung, has vowed for an enhanced alliance with the United States and a boost to trilateral security cooperation with Washington and Tokyo in response to extensive North Korean provocations and missile tests (Aljazeera, 2022; Smith & Lee, 2022). He has also called for greater cooperation with other democracies in order to resist the growing influence of authoritarian states, which implicates China. This has even extended to the expression of interest in working with the Quad (Akiyama, 2022). With this being said, Yoon faces major roadblocks to reorienting South Korea's foreign policy that will prove difficult to overcome. Most notably, these include dependence on trade with China, which accounts for 27 percent of South Korea's total exports in 2021 (Santander, 2021), as well as entrenched and emotionally-charged societal animosity towards Japan that restrains the range of cooperation.

## Conclusion and Considerations

The divergent policies that South Korea and Japan display towards China hold important implications for the strategic context and balance of power in East Asia going forward. While neither South Korea or Japan display any interest in retreating from the close security relationships they share with the US, the possibility of either state decoupling or reducing its reliance on the US in the future cannot be ruled out entirely. Both states represent independent "spokes" held together only by their mutual relationship to the US "hub", but there is little good will or impetus for deeper mutual cooperation independent of this mutual relationship. Therefore, future developments with respect to South Korean and Japanese security postures vis-à-vis each other will also be heavily contingent on the form, scale, and credibility of US engagement in the region.

Were Washington to lose Seoul's confidence by either neglecting its security commitments or demonstrating unreliability (such as during a Taiwan contingency), South Korea may be forced to reconsider its security relationships and pursue a new strategy that draws it closer into China's orbit. This is of paramount concern in the wake of the US' speedy withdrawal from Afghanistan in June 2021, which has brought scrutiny to the reliability of the US as an ally. A reassessment of South Korean posture may also be propelled along by Japanese rearmament. Given its distrust of Japan in addition to a reliance on Chinese trade and cooperation

in dealing with North Korea, A shift in South Korea's relationship with China to one of greater reliance and cooperation is a serious possibility as the regional balance of power shifts. However, this will be highly contingent on how the new South Korean leadership under Yoon Suk-yeol develops its security relationship with democratic allies, and whether it is able to manage and/or resolve deep-rooted tensions with Japan.

On the flipside, Japan is likely to continue the trend of deepening its defence partnership with the US and strengthening its web of regional security relationships such as via the Quad. Japan has little good will in China and can expect to find itself isolated and disadvantaged in a Chinese-dominated East Asia. Therefore, Japan has few options but to increase its efforts to counterbalance Chinese regional power, which is likely to have the unintended consequence of exacerbating regional anxieties, particularly in South Korea and China, thus pushing these states closer together. It is also reasonable to expect a more extensive policy of Japanese remilitarization in order to reduce reliance on the US, while also improving Japan's domestic capacity to resist external threats (Tajima, 2020). Although Japan has no interest in downgrading its cooperation with the US, its pursuit of rearmament would similarly be enhanced by a hypothetical scenario wherein the US' security commitments are brought into question. Therefore, the embedded tendencies of these two states demonstrate the continued importance of close US engagement in the region and credible demonstrations of commitment to both states' security as well as third parties. Beyond merely balancing Chinese power, this presence will ensure that a negative spiral of strategic balancing and realignment does not occur and add to existing instabilities.

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