

Will Japan Overcome Abe's Revisionist Tendencies? Growing Concerns over Japan in Northeast Asia

July 14, 2014

Interviewees

T.J. Pempel
Yul Sohn

For some time, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's security policies have caused much concern for its neighbors, South Korea, China and the U.S. As much as Japan is wary of China's rise in the region, China as well as South Korea are concerned about Prime Minister Abe's revisionist tendencies over history and his leaning towards the right. For the U.S., South Korea and Japan are the two key allies in Northeast Asia and thus indispensable for maintaining its position in the region and furthering its strategic rebalance to Asia. Given the increasingly troubled and complicated regional dynamics, Pempel and Sohn sought to explore the ongoing concerns in Northeast Asia and assess Japan and South Korea's strategic approach toward the region.

Problematic Japan: A Revisionist Abe Raises Concerns for the U.S.

“Such blatant, ridiculous historical revisionism certainly makes the U.S. want to distance itself from that, but more importantly it would like Prime Minister Abe to keep his mouth shut. Because that has nothing to do with America's longer term efforts at convincing China that it needs to be cooperative in many areas”

Sohn: U.S. strategy in Asia involves engaging China on the one hand and hedging against it on the other. As for hedging, the triangle cooperation between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan seems to be very much instrumental. What is your assessment of this cooperative relationship?

Pempel: There are two important triangles in East Asia. One of them is the U.S.-Japan-South Korea triangle, which can be considered as a triangle of hedging, if you may, against China or against North Korea. But then there is a second triangle, the China-South Korea-Japan triangle, which is very much more of the engagement triangle. Unfortunately, that second triangle is really suffering from broken legs now with Prime Minister Abe and the difficulties that his revisionism has created for South Korea and China.

On the security triangle, it was very disappointing to the U.S. to have the whole legacy of the Obama administration undercut by Prime Minister Abe's continual revisionist history, visits to the Yasukuni shrine, the NHK spokespeople who were talking about the fact that there was never a massacre in Nanjing, etc. Such blatant, ridiculous historical revisionism certainly makes the U.S. want to distance itself from that, but more importantly it would like Prime Minister Abe to keep his mouth shut. Because that has nothing to do with America's longer term efforts at convincing China that it needs to be cooperative in many areas, and convincing South Korea and Japan that they have reasons to cooperate militarily.

This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Q&A.

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D
Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu
Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea

© EAI 2014

www.eai.or.kr

Every time Prime Minister Abe opens his mouth on some nationalist issue, it reinforces worries in South Korea and China. And it makes it difficult to keep the China-South Korea-Japan triangle of engagement intact.

As you know, the trilateral leaders meeting, which was a spinoff from the ASEAN plus three (APT), had made some real progress since 2008. There was a common investment treaty that was agreed to among the three countries and negotiations on a trilateral free trade agreement were underway. Now, the trilateral free trade agreement is stalled and there has been no meeting of the leaders. That is very bad for the overall policy of engagement. On the other hand, the policies of containment, or the U.S.-Japan-South Korea triangle of containment if you want, is strong and being reinforced. But that triangle of containment is also being handicapped by the Japanese behavior because it makes it difficult for South Korea to cooperate with Japan. Therefore, the U.S. and the Obama administration is very frustrated with Prime Minister Abe and the direction that he is taking, which runs counter to America's notions of containment and engagement at the same time.

Sohn: Until very recently, Japan has been considered to be in decline, stricken by domestic political problems. But all of a sudden with Prime Minister Abe, we are seeing a more aggressive and proactive Japan both in terms of security and the economy. You just mentioned his advance on the security policies. Although it did not fall through, Prime Minister Abe was very active in promoting the TPP as well. What would the impact of this new Japan on the regional security and economic environment?

Pempel: When Japan focused on economic development in the past, it played a very positive role across the Asian region. The economic success of Japan, despite as much as it is unpopular to say, was picked up by general Park Chung Hee for South Korea to emulate many of the strategies of Japan. It was also picked up by Chiang Kai-shek of the Kuomintang (KMT) in Taiwan. In some ways, it moved both South Korea and Taiwan from an excessively military focus which both governments had in the 1970s into the early 1980s to a much greater appreciation of the power of economic development, and eventually laid the groundwork for them both to become functioning, thriving democracies. Japan also played a positive economic role in the development of Southeast Asia. Much of the Japanese investment going into that area catalyzed economic success of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, etc. In that sense, a rich, prosperous, and economically concentrated Japan is an incredible plus for the region. As much as the Chinese would hate to admit it, Japan also played a very positive role in China's economic development—a lot of Japanese aid went to China, Japan was the first country to back off from sanctions after the Tiananmen incident, and it has been relatively quiet about human rights violations in China. So, Japan has not been a bad partner for China as well.

That said, it would be a mistake to concentrate too much on Japan's recent military moves. I think Japan has perfectly good reasons for reinterpreting the constitution and taking on a larger military and defense role. Its military budget is still relatively small for a country of its size. Its military activities have generally been extremely cautious that can be seen in its supporting of the Afghanistan war from offshore with fueling vessels and sending a small contingent to Iraq. But it has really been minimally involved in any conflicts. Japan's greater involvement comes from the coast guard to many Southeast Asian countries dealing with piracy issues, etc. In that sense, we have to be careful not to assume that because Japan is increasing its military budget slightly or talking about collective self-defense, we are back to the 1930s.

But Prime Minister Abe does not make that interpretation easy. With his reinterpretation of history, blinders on

with regard to Japan's behavior in the 1930s, presumed insistence on revising the constitution, strange attitudes toward religious education and the role of women and so forth, it is very easy to come to the conclusion that he is the reincarnation of his grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, in the pre-war period. The constant rhetoric on defense and security, history, the visits to the Yasukuni shrine, riding on planes that are labeled 731—with all of those things that are symbolic fireboxes in Asia, run the risk of taking Japan's attention away from economic recovery. Japan had a long twenty years of depression, debt, and demoralization on the part of its public. And it becomes very critical for Japan to get its economy going, which is also very critical for the rest of the region. If I had my druthers, I would like to see Prime Minister Abe forget about all of the foreign policy foci that he has got with all of the history issues, concentrate on improving the economy, and be willing to make those structural reforms. A stronger Japanese economy would enable him to have much closer relations with South Korea, take away the notion of a threat to China, and position Japan well with regard to Southeast Asia.

Sohn: Your assessment with regard to Prime Minister Abe's current historical revisionism, militarization, and pursuit of Abenomics suggest that they would go against the interest of the U.S. and South Korea. Do you see any possibilities that he would be more pragmatic enough to change his foreign policy stance and reengage in trilateral cooperation?

Pempel: The U.S. sent numerous missives out to suggest that he should not focus on these issues and stay away from the Yasukuni shrine. But he just went ahead and did it. So, he is clearly a man who thinks he can do these things and get away with it, in part because he thinks he is correct and in part because I think he feels that there is no counter-balancing force against him. That to me is the biggest worry with regard to Northeast Asia right now.

Even though the U.S. and Japan are close allies and Japan is a democracy, I worry that Prime Minister Abe is not going to move the economy quickly enough. In the last quarter, Japan's GDP was only up 0.7 percent and it looks like growth is slowing. The stock index has fallen back to normal levels as well. That suggests the initial spurt of enthusiasm towards Japan's economic recovery has been waning. It is really going to get a shot in the arm if and only if Prime Minister Abe makes some dramatic moves on structural reform, and I would say the TPP would be a plus in that regard; it works in the same direction. But somehow he has been putting a lot more attention on the issues of history, national identity, reinterpretations, etc. That is just a misuse of political resources.

A Complicated Past adding Complexity to the Present: South Korea's Place in the Region under Park Geun-hye

"...there are extremely good reasons for South Korea and Japan to cooperate; both are democracies and allies to the U.S. and have very positive dynamic economies along with close interactions with each other...But the legacies of the history issue, particularly as it is interpreted by the leaders of both countries, have really made for a very poisonous politics lately."

Sohn: When you see the current relationship between South Korea and Japan, it is at an all-time-low. How do you assess South Korea's policy toward Japan? What are your thoughts on President Park Geun-hye's stern response against Prime Minister Abe?

Pempel: President Park has been very good in articulating policies that would suggest the importance of building trust among neighbors in the direction of trying to focus on non-traditional security issues where they can cooperate. I think all of these things are a plus. Personally, I wish that she would have a bit more of the courage of someone like Kim Dae Jung, who was prepared to meet with Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo and essentially say that we have a very negative history bilaterally but it is really important for us to put that behind us and look for ways that we can cooperate in the future. But of course, Prime Minister Obuchi is very different from Prime Minister Abe and President Kim is different from President Park.

Nonetheless, there are extremely good reasons for South Korea and Japan to cooperate; both are democracies and allies to the U.S. and have very positive dynamic economies along with close interactions with each other. They could cooperate on a host of issues such as improving the environmental pollution in China, etc. In many of these ways there are good structural incentives for the two of them to cooperate. But the legacies of the history issue, particularly as it is interpreted by the leaders of both countries, have really made for a very poisonous politics lately.

Sohn: You just touched upon South Korea's approach toward regional cooperation with respect to non-traditional security issue areas. The South Korean government proposed the so called Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, which is the regional version of President Park's *trustpolitik*. The initiative suggests cooperating on non-traditional security or soft issues to build trust and the habits of cooperation, in anticipation of the spillover effects toward hard security issues. How do you evaluate this initiative?

Pempel: It is probably very good in the abstract. Certainly, building habits of cooperation across national borders is a plus and there certainly is an absence of trust among many of the top leaders across Northeast Asia. At the same time, one has to be careful about assuming that because three countries can cooperate cleaning up the environment, it will somehow resolve the territorial, history or identity issues they have between them. There is always the hope that cooperation in areas A, B, and C spill over to D, E, and F. But oftentimes government policies are in silos, and the environmental technicians can cooperate without any generals or the foreign ministry being involved, or that affecting ODA.

I would use this to say that one of the big disappointments that I see in East Asian regionalism is the fact that the trilateral leaders meeting is not being held. It has been on hold essentially since Prime Minister Abe came into office. If you want to build trust across different issues, having the senior leaders of those countries involved goes a long way in that direction because in preparation for those meetings, the staff of the presidents or the prime ministers have to put together on what are we going to cooperate on, how do we get some talking points, etc. And suddenly you begin contacting multiple agencies, saying "okay, you guys seem to have cooperated on pollution on these countries. Tell us more about that. Is this something that our President can use to help create a climate of trust?"

In that sense, I think the potential is there. But if it is only operating at the director-general level or at the level of individual bureaucratic agencies, it does not have the same potential for spillover as it does when you get the top leaders involved, because then you mobilize the entire government. That said, I would like to see the resumption of the trilateral meetings even though that would probably be extremely difficult for President Park

for domestic reasons and also for President Xi Jinping.

Nonetheless, that would be a very positive direction. And if they could get those meetings back on track, the possibility is there to move, for example, the trilateral FTA forward. Getting those three leaders in the same room would be a very positive move. It is not going to be easy domestically. But I think President Park has the capacity as a leader to do this, and it might be a very positive legacy for her. ■

About the Interviewees

T.J. Pempel

T.J. Pempel is Jack M. Forcey Chair and professor at the Department of Political Science, U.C. Berkeley. His published works include *Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia* (2012), *Remapping East Asia: The Construction of a Region* (2005), *Beyond Bilateralism: U.S.-Japan Relations in the New Asia-Pacific* (2004), and *Regime Shift: Comparative Dynamics of the Japanese Political Economy* (1998).

Yul Sohn

Yul Sohn is chair of EAI's Center for Japan Studies and dean of the Graduate School of International Studies at Yonsei University.