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### Getting the Triangle Right: South Korean Management of the Sino-Japanese Rivalry

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## Getting the Triangle Right : South Korean Management of the Sino-Japanese Rivalry

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**ABSTRACTS:** South Korea needs a new strategy for managing triangular ties with China and Japan. It must address the deteriorating state of Sino-Japanese relations as well as U.S. scepticism about China's push for regionalism and the South's autonomous inclinations through a patient role as a facilitator, not a balancer. In 2005 it overreached in a desperate response to a difficult environment. Tracing the dilemma the South faces, this paper focuses first on the U.S. factor and the frustrating impact on Roh Moo-hyun's plans to engage North Korea. Then it evaluates ties with Japan, delineating causes and effects of the sharp slide in bilateral cooperation with restoration difficult. Next it assesses relations with China and how hard it is to synchronize them to other ties. The conclusion stresses the value to South Korea of a balance of power. As a middle power between assertive competitors, it must tread cautiously with special attention to shaping the triangle with China and Japan.

**KEYWORDS:** Northeast Asia, security triangle, South Korean-Japanese relations, South Korean-Chinese relations, South Korean-U.S. relations, Sino-Japanese relations

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South Korea is buffeted by four countries whose foreign policy does not measure up to the standards needed for our times. All have reacted to recent international events by accentuating worrisome trends seen in earlier policies and show no inclination of changing direction. George W. Bush has steered the US not only away from Clinton's engagement policy toward China but also toward an inconsistent regional strategy in which Richard Armitage's Japan first approach coupled with Robert Zoellick's follow-up to encourage China to become a "stakeholder" has been

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interspersed with Dick Cheney's neo-conservative quasi-containment of China combined with an ideological rejection of diplomacy with North Korea.<sup>1</sup> Koizumi Junichiro has let his obsession with visiting the Yasukuni Shrine overwhelm traditional diplomatic professionalism, making no effort to staunch an upsurge of ultra-nationalist claims in Japan or to try to contain the damage across the region. Hu Jintao has been less flagrant about his transgressions of cautious diplomacy, but some would argue that he has betrayed early expectations that China was ready to find common language to reassure the US and Japan by exploring shared values with increasing transparency. Finally, Vladimir Putin has resuscitated the image of an authoritarian leader in Moscow narrowly concerned with supporting dictators in order to expand his state's influence regardless of the impact on regional stability and human rights. In the shadow of the powerful US influence and a marginal Russian one, South Korea faces the challenge of managing the deepening rivalry between China and Japan.

Among three choices for South Korean diplomacy in the coming years, only one is bound to serve the national interest best. Yet, given the policy choices favored in the four competing powers and North Korea's inclination to seek advantage from hyperbolic rhetoric and purposeful threats, the path forward is not easy. One choice is to accept the vision of US neoconservatives and Japanese ultranationalists and draw a taut line against North Korea in the Six-Party Talks while recognizing that a three-way alliance must stand firm against China's drive for regionalism. Taking this approach would be an admission that the Sunshine Policy was wrong and that the cold war continues in Asia, reviving the logic of the 1950s to 1980s. A second choice is to accede to the rise of China as the center of regionalism, essentially reverting to the sinocentric order during the millennium before the end of the nineteenth century. Given the rapid

economic integration of South Korea and China and the preeminent influence of China in dealing with North Korea, this might seem to be a realistic adjustment to ongoing trends if it were not obvious that it would be a betrayal of aspirations for autonomy and leverage in foreign policy that have escaped Koreans since the seventh century and only from 1990 became a serious possibility. Finally, South Korea could strive for a region in equilibrium where the weight of China would be balanced by the weight of nearby Japan coupled with that of distant US, and its own flexibility would be maximized. This is a worthy goal not contradictory to certain views advocated by US and Japanese diplomats as well as experts in China, but the way Sino-Japanese relations are evolving may now be the foremost barrier to its realization.

Why is the deterioration in Sino-Japanese and Japanese-South Korean relations of 2005 different from other setbacks in the region over the past decades? First, contrary to what is asserted in most coverage, it is about fundamental matters of security and identity. Second, it should be understood not only as another instance of “economics hot, politics cold,” but, as explained by former Japanese ambassador Tanino Sakutaro, also as “people cold.”<sup>2</sup> Even Japanese-South Korean mutual trust, which had been rising since 1998 and benefited from the “World Cup,” the “Korean wave,” and a surge in cross-tourism, has fallen with 89 percent of the Koreans saying that they cannot trust Japan, including a doubling from 2002 to 38 percent who cannot trust it at all.<sup>3</sup> Third, it exposes the difficulty of South Korea in steering a middle road in the region. Northeast Asia is at a crossroads, and how Seoul manages ties to its two closest great power neighbors is one factor that may tip the balance. Cognizant of forces that complicated Seoul’s choices in 2005, we still should draw lessons on what is needed to improve the situation.

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The intensified rivalry between China and Japan posed new challenges in 2005 for many countries. The US faced unprecedented concern that this rivalry was spoiling the atmosphere for strategic cooperation in East Asia, leading officials to debate quiet intervention to find a way to ameliorate damage from Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine while still giving priority to boosting Japan versus China. ASEAN states struggled with the impact of the rivalry on plans for regionalism, agreeing with Japan's request to expand the new East Asian Summit with three additional members that had the effect of diluting China's potential dominance but followed with an approach welcomed by China to confine discussion on forging an East Asian Community to the more compact ASEAN + 3 setting. Russia and India debated counteroffers by these two other claimants to Asian great power status, without making abrupt changes. Yet, the most important battleground for China and Japan once again became the Korean peninsula; South Koreans confronted the most urgent decisions on how to manage this rivalry along with a fraying US alliance.

For at least five reasons observers of late have misjudged the Sino-Japanese-South Korean triangle. First, they have been preoccupied with the alliances of the US with each of these countries as well as steps in 1999-2004 to strengthen the Japanese-South Korean leg of the triangle. Overrating these steps, many lost sight of the strategic context, including the forces pulling the two sides apart. Second, many observers keep concentrating on economic relations as a force drawing countries closer, ignoring that the rise of China demonstrates that its positive role as an economic magnet does not cancel out its disruptive geopolitical impact. Third, enthusiasm about the accelerating cultural linkages between Japanese and South Koreans obscures problems in bilateral relations, among them cultural ties of a different sort associated with historical

memories rather than TV and cinema/drama. Fourth, overemphasis on proximate causes in the handling of historical issues has distracted attention from deeper forces at work. Finally, a tendency to rely mostly on Japanese sources obfuscates more negative impressions emanating from South Korea as well as the grassroots basis of evolving Chinese reasoning.

The discussion below concentrates on developments in 2005 with separate treatment of South Korean ties to Japan and to China. Before turning to these separate legs of the triangle, however, it is important to consider the role of the US as well as an historical perspective on the dilemma the South faces. The conclusion argues that until there is clearer agreement between the US and China on power sharing followed by a joint approach to the North Korean nuclear problem it is unlikely that South Korea will find a way to manage the East Asian triangle effectively. It also suggests that patience is needed to take advantage of opportunities that arise for a middle power that should define its role as a facilitator while avoiding the loss of its voice on regional security matters.

### **The South Korean Dilemma and the US Factor**

Apart from the thirteenth-century Mongol use of Korea as a launching pad for an invasion fleet, Korea went more than 900 years without becoming a target of geopolitical competition between China and Japan. China had the greater influence, and it refrained from pressing its advantage in a way that might have caused a backlash, as warring lords across Japan concentrated their attention on consolidation of power on

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their own islands. Only in the 1590s after the struggle had been resolved inside Japan through unification that recognized a decentralized balance of power did Hideyoshi Toyotomi launch a ruthless invasion, which was rebuffed only with the help of the Chinese army. If over the next three centuries Japan made no further aggressive moves, memories endured of Korea's vulnerability. The image survived of a peninsula at risk should the balance of power between its continental and maritime neighbors be disrupted.

When in the 1890s-1900s the peninsula emerged as the dividing line between contending spheres of influence, its leaders, torn in their response, did not adequately resist Japan's imperialist ambitions. Korea was annexed by Japan, leading subsequent generations to draw lessons about the danger of their land becoming a pawn in great power struggles. The cold war division across the thirty-eighth parallel, which allowed little scope to either side after the carnage of the Korean War, reinforced these lessons. As the peninsula again has become the center of regional rivalry after the cold war,<sup>4</sup> attention has gradually been shifting from the old divide between Moscow and Washington to the reemerging competition between China and Japan. In 2005 this change was confirmed by the dramatic deterioration in South Korean as well as Chinese relations with Japan.

Koreans have learned not to rest their hopes and security on US appreciation of their national interests. In 1905 instead of resisting Japan's seizure of their country the US gave its support through a deal that brought Japan's approval for US colonization of the Philippines. A century later there was concern that again the US was mostly focused on sharing power with Japan, turning a blind eye to its revisionist strategy as long as that did not conflict with its support for US strategic interests. US handling of North

Korea in the nuclear crisis and China in its rapid ascent to regional power have left South Koreans suspicious too that maximizing US power has reemerged as the prime driving force.

In the 1990s the most favorable opportunities arose for breaking down barriers in East Asia. In the first half of the decade Japanese were wavering on the intensity of their ties to the US, optimistic about prospects for leadership in Asia, and flexible about further concessions over history. South Korea was not Japan's priority, but having normalized ties with China in 1992 the South was improving ties with Japan and might have gone further. In the mid-90s when liberals in the LDP led the way in approaching North Korea including using rice donations that overshadowed South Korean assistance, South Korea and Japan might have figured out how to coordinate instead of the South growing more suspicious. With the old fisheries agreement expiring after thirty years and new tensions resulting from the establishment of maritime economic zones that extended rival claims South Korea and Japan let a couple of years pass in 1996-97 without finding an answer. Finally, after the breakthrough summit of October 1998 despite momentum for all-around improvement in relations, the strategic divide was growing between South Korea's focus on engaging North Korea and rallying other states behind this common cause and Japan's preoccupation with containing North Korea and, before long, welcoming a tougher US posture both to the North and to China. The window of opportunity was closing just when Japanese and Republicans joining the Bush administration assumed it was opening wide.<sup>5</sup>

In 2000 South Korea appeared to be emerging as a double center: the driving force for the Sunshine Policy to pry open North Korea with support from the four most concerned great powers; and the centerpiece in regionalism gaining its own place beside



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ASEAN in ASEAN + 3 with prospects of an upsurge of regionalism in Northeast Asia too.<sup>6</sup> Even in 2002 it seemed that South Korea had a promising opportunity to draw China and Japan closer and place itself at the center. Economic ties were thriving, the “Korean wave” was on the rise with a combination of pop culture and family dramas, and both the Sunshine Policy and uncertainties of US-North Korean relations seemed to pull the region together. The glow of the co-hosted World Cup drew Tokyo and Seoul closer, while the war against terror appeared to have stabilized Sino-US ties for the good of all. Optimism over a “new age” in relations was running high; and North Korea did not seem to pose a big problem. At the July 1 summit of Koizumi and Kim Dae-jung the topic of North Korea dominated. Kim argued that the Sunshine Policy was the only choice, and Koizumi agreed that dialogue was the only way to proceed.<sup>7</sup> Although plans for his visit to Pyongyang were still incomplete and secret, it seemed unlikely that a sharp strategic divide would arise. Instead, South Korea became caught in a double squeeze. More than even China, it is stuck between the US and North Korea in the nuclear crisis. At the same time, it is the one state most affected by the deteriorating Sino-Japanese relations.

In the first nuclear crisis the South Korean-Chinese-Japanese triangle played little role. None of the three was eager to become involved, rejecting economic sanctions which some in the US had suggested. This situation changed in 1997-98. At the end of 1997 China started to offer more support to North Korea to reduce the chances of a collapse and, increasingly too, to respond to US appeals to use its leverage on the North.<sup>8</sup> Then after a North Korean missile was fired over Japan at the end of August 1998 Japan became more active in coordinating with the US and South Korea over the North. With the Perry process producing US-led consultations, Kim Dae-jung

could pursue his strong desire to engage North Korea without fear of compromising relations with the US, but also with new attention to supportive roles for China and Japan. On the one hand, Japan beckoned along with the US with calls for closer military cooperation and joint strategic thinking along the following lines: only the US preponderance of power prevents war in Northeast Asia, China's rise can be better managed by coordination among the three other leaders in the region; and Japan shares with the South universal values while it poses no threat in the region. On the other, China made the case to the South that it favors stability through regional balance, it represents the gateway to North Korea, and its rising power cannot be contained. Koreans saw a shift in Japan's position toward the defense of Taiwan and growing signs of tension in Sino-Japanese relations as Chinese and Japanese nationalism rose, and they found their country caught in the middle.<sup>9</sup> Without choosing sides, the South found that this tug-of-war only intensified in the second nuclear crisis.

As long as North Korea loomed as a threat, Japanese-South Korean ties gained a boost, seen in 1969 when defense exchanges began and again in 1994 when the first nuclear crisis prompted more coordination. In 1998 when Japanese awakened to a serious North Korean threat, they were eager to carry this logic to a new stage and were inclined to view Kim Dae-jung's support for this in the context of an all-around upgrading of relations as confirmation that South Koreans agreed. Yet, in fact the North was rapidly fading as a threat in the South. Instead of seeking support in isolating the North, the leaders in the South turned their attention to ways to persuade the North of the benefits of reconciliation as well of how others would contribute to the unification process. This gave the edge to China and posed new challenges for relations with Japan.<sup>10</sup> With some in South Korea still fearful of Japanese militarism or at least

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doubtful that Japan would welcome a united Korea less dependent on the US, it should have been clear to Japanese and Americans alike that the burden was on Japan to win the trust of its former colony. A strategic error occurred when the Bush administration ignored this psychology in favor of whole-hearted support for Japan's leadership role in Asian security and assumed that it could steer Japanese-South Korean ties toward a full-fledged security triangle.

In Bush's first term South Korea found that it could straddle the sharpening divide between China and Japan. In accord with the wishes of the US, the strategic triangle with Japan included was becoming more of a reality. Yet, as economic ties with China spurted ahead and there were no apparent security differences, ties across the Yellow Sea widened too. There was potential for trouble, however, in the Bush administration's pressure for force relocation, seen as shifting US troops from resisting an invasion by the North to preparing for a clash across the Taiwan Strait. In addition, the US was growing colder toward regionalism, a favorite theme of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, as a way of slowing China's rise to leadership in Asia. Although the nuclear crisis pitted the US and increasingly Japan too against the pleas of South Korea as well as China and Russia for a package deal based on wide-ranging negotiations, the divisions were largely obscured in 2004 as Japan joined South Korea in urging the US to show more flexibility.

In the spring of 2003 the triangle of Japan-South Korea-the US was redefined in the shadow of the nuclear crisis. Suspected of anti-Americanism, worried about a drop in foreign investment, and fearful of abandonment by the US, Roh acquiesced to a quiet role despite his refusal to agree to pressure taking priority over dialogue in dealing with the North. Indeed, Japan's handling of the June summit in Tokyo led some in Korea

even to charge Roh with “kowtowing.” Yet, this was not a stable arrangement both because the US and Japan lacked a viable strategy and because Roh personally and South Koreans in general resented the subordination of their national interests. As Bush and Koizumi drew closer and each pursued policies anathema to Roh, his situation grew more difficult.

In the transition from Bush term-1 to Bush term-2 a new climate arose. US relations with South Korea slipped and set the background for a much steeper plunge in the South’s relations with Japan. In 2004 groups advising the South Korean government had been meeting to set a strategic course that suggested a kind of “cooperative independence.” Terms such as “balancer” or “harmonious balancer” followed. A populist leader of a “middle power” facing difficult circumstances searched for a response to a predicament and may have desperately weighed the implications of his choices. Roh’s speech in Los Angeles en route to the APEC meetings in Chile was a kind of turning point, startling the US with the empathy shown to North Korea’s strategic logic for developing nuclear weapons. When he met Bush in Chile, there was awkwardness over this. Since the time of his election on a wave of “anti-Americanism” high US officials had shown their suspicion of Roh on various occasions. The old doubts were rekindled. Yet, even if we agree that Roh was provocative, the root of the problem lies in US policy, including the impact on Japan, which bore the brunt of South Korean frustration in 2005. The year 2005 revealed not only the enduring legacy of history but also a security chasm.

Just as there were clear differences between realists and revisionists in Japan’s management of relations with China and South Korea, observers in the region recognize the complexities of working with three types of US Republican officials: pro-

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engagement with China figures such as Brent Snowcroft, US-Japan alliance boosters as the basis for cautiously engaging China such as Richard Armitage, and neo-conservatives who view China as a threat. Acknowledging that the era of pure engagement is over for Japan too, Japanese analysts urged Koizumi not to join the neo-cons by arousing Chinese suspicions that it was fanning the flames of Taiwan independence, while ignoring China's appeals to soften its policies and discover that China, in return, would adopt even softer policies.<sup>11</sup> South Korea faced an even more immediate challenge of working with US officials who could not agree in dealing not only with China but also with North Korea. Sensing that neo-conservatives were resurgent as Armitage along with Colin Powell left their posts, Roh lashed out, especially at Koizumi, who was embracing the Bush agenda.

Criticisms of the idea that South Korea can be the balancer have difficulty finding a way around the increasing reality that US was not adequately taking into account the South's interests and was relying heavily on Japan in a way that freed Japan's leaders to embrace revisionist history without regard to the South's hurt feelings. One argument was that only by drawing closer to the US and, of necessity, accepting it as the true balancer could the South obstruct the exclusive US-Japan alliance with its *carte blanche* for Japanese nationalism. Another was that only a continued strong alliance with the US would serve the twin goals of forging good relations with North Korea and advancing peace and security in the region.<sup>12</sup> Yet, as much as criticisms of Roh may be warranted for shaking US confidence, they fail to address the dilemma of how can the South pursue its own interests if the US and Japan continue on a course that largely ignores it.

From January to May 2005 the triangle became more problematic. Many blame it on Japanese provocations, leading Roh to vilify Japan on March 1 at his speech in honor of the Korean independence movement, on March 17 in a report through the National Security Council, and on March 23 in a message to the nation. A somewhat different set of provocations also led Chinese leaders to allow demonstrations against Japan in April and to abandon hope in Koizumi in May when they recalled Vice Premier Wu Yi before she could meet the Japanese prime minister on what was considered a last-ditch healing visit. Some accuse China, pointing to the demonstrations as well as to the lack of pressure on North Korea despite its provocative rhetoric in February and disinterest in returning to the Six-Party Talks until June. Still others charge that Roh's strategic shift was the critical factor. One Japanese publication asserts that a report issued by the Blue House at the end of January signified a sharp realignment in South Korean foreign policy, breaking the agreement with Bush of May 2003 on linkage of North-South relations to progress in eliminating North Korean nuclear weapons, placing the South in a neutral position if a Sino-US conflict erupted over Taiwan without accepting the call for strategic flexibility for US forces in the South, and reacting negatively to Japan's diplomatic and strategic repositioning.<sup>13</sup> When Roh used the term balancer for Seoul's emerging role in Northeast Asia this symbolized the affront to the US and Japan. Yet, the alternative of acquiescence as the weak leg in the alliance triangle cannot be taken for granted as viable for a country whose national interests were not being addressed by the narrow focus of its two partners.

The nuclear crisis was at an impasse. When the US and Japanese foreign ministers met on May 2, 2005 the focus was on how together to pressure China in order to make North Korea change.<sup>14</sup> Somehow, South Korea managed to turn the situation

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around for a time, suggesting that it knew how to appeal to the North and in early June getting Bush's consent to proceed. Yet, a summer thaw, which yielded the September 19 Joint Statement at the Six-Party Talks, only delayed the downward slide in Seoul's ability to maneuver among the powers. In the fall of 2005 and the first half of 2006 we observe a state almost completely stymied: unable to impact the US approach to North Korea, frozen in its ties with Japan, and with no prospect of turning openly to China. High on the list of what went wrong is the sharp deterioration in relations with Japan from March 2005.

In 2006 in the throes of uncertainty over the future of South Korean relations with the US two bold initiatives were launched: negotiations on a rush schedule to establish a bilateral FTA; and a strategic dialogue at the level of foreign ministers. These attempts to solidify fraying ties and put them on a firm foundation for the future could not obscure the fact that sharp differences exist in perceptions of regional security and North Korea. While on the surface this may have seemed to be an attempt to preserve the hub and spokes approach long favored by the US, it was actually a response to the reality that not only in the Six-Party Talks but also in the triangular ties among China-Japan-South Korea, the US role is critical. Until the South clarifies its relationship to its only ally and that ally's evolving strategic aims, it is unlikely to know how to respond to China and Japan within a multilateral context. This has to be a two-way street, depending also on a viable US strategy for resolving the nuclear crisis and further refinement of belated efforts to strike a balance between closer alliance with Japan and stabilized relations with China. The effort to resurrect bilateral allied relations between Seoul and Washington should be set against the problems in the East Asian triangle that puts Seoul at the center.

## **South Korean-Japanese Relations**

Improvements in Japanese-South Korean relations were rooted in at least three basic understandings. First, the history issue would be handled with sensitivity by Japan. Second, generous financial assistance and economic cooperation would lubricate ties. Third, the two states shared a common security outlook, grounded in alliances with the US but extending above all to management of relations with North Korea. When relations improved in 1983, 1992, and again in 1998 the security factor played a large role. In 1983 both Japan and South Korea were more security conscious as was the US under Ronald Reagan, who prioritized security ties with each. In 1992 Japan agreed to forsake separate negotiations it was conducting with North Korea in order to coordinate with the South as that country took the lead. In 1998 there was a breakthrough to more substantial military ties. Yet, this was only an apparent meeting of the minds, since Japan sought cooperation after being alarmed by the North's missile test and South Korea prepared its Sunshine Policy by seeking Japan's support for engagement. In 2003 Roh and Koizumi appeared to be upgrading relations, but none of the three binding forces was in operation. Financial aid was over and South Korea's commerce with China was rapidly overtaking that with Japan. Koizumi and Roh were sharply at odds in their historical thinking. Also, strategic thinking split the two leaders, although in the shadow of the US push for a united front to force North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons there was a semblance of agreement. Having in 1999 refused to join the US missile defense program and then been reluctant to discuss China-related issues in the



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Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), South Korea was clearly heading in a different direction.

Why has South Korea found it much harder to manage Sino-Japanese relations than anticipated just a few years earlier? Three rivalries cast a dark shadow that was not anticipated. The Sino-US rivalry, while somewhat stabilized after the flare-up in 2001, posed difficulties for a US ally drawing ever closer to its traditional protector and most important trading partner. The US-North Korean standoff left South Korea's Sunshine Policy in shambles and put it in the middle of a tug-of-war over how to resolve the nuclear crisis. Finally, the Sino-Japanese competition raised sensitive issues of security and history on which the South could not be an innocent bystander.

Japan has missed many opportunities to stabilize relations with South Korea. One reason is a failure to grasp the significance of South Korea to Japanese security and the reality since the end of the cold war that the South has more options. This reflects a lack of strategic thinking toward Asia,<sup>15</sup> and also a nationalist streak in Japanese domestic politics and debates about identity that skews discussions of the history issue and its consequences. A second reason is US foreign policy, which sometimes appears to give Japan excessive support and to oversimplify strategic choices in Asia, rather than exploring with it tough choices that might provoke renewed debate about the alliance. In 2005 Japan again fell short, in part because of its handling of North Korea.

South Koreans are sensitive to Japanese unilateral moves toward North Korea whether positive or negative. Roh Tae-woo was pursuing nordpolitik toward two of the North's neighbors when Kanemaru Shin led a high-level Japanese delegation that sought a breakthrough toward normalization with the North. Kim Young-sam was resisting economic ties with the North when Japan decided to send a lot of rice as

humanitarian assistance. In each instance, Seoul found Tokyo's moves uncoordinated and contradictory to its own. In late 1998 and 1999 Obuchi's stress on the threat from North Korea clashed with Kim Dae-jung's efforts to start the Sunshine Policy, and from 2003 the obsession in Japan with punishing the North for not resolving the abduction issue contradicted Roh's appeal for continued engagement to temper the US pressure against the North. The struggle to end the cold war in Asia revealed the gap in strategic interests between the two top regional allies of the US, which should not have come as a surprise. This divide resurfaced in 2005 as a critical factor spoiling bilateral relations, especially in the midst of a nuclear crisis the resolution of which has proven difficult.

Neither Japan nor South Korea fulfilled the expectations of the other. After the World Cup as many as 77 percent of Japanese—a figure that had climbed above 50 percent in 2000 and was expected to rise further—felt friendly toward South Korea. The South Korean figure was lower at 47 percent, but it had more than doubled since the mid-90s and was clearly on an upward trajectory. Yet, Japan was anticipating a close partner along with the US in demanding that China accept democratic values and in pressuring North Korea to yield with the possibility of its collapse. In contrast, South Korea was seeking a partner in building a cooperative regional order, normalizing ties with North Korea and joining with China in steps toward regionalism.<sup>16</sup> South Koreans emphasized preventing a great power struggle from occurring, while the Japanese concentrated on working together to block an unfavorable regional power balance.

Roh is known to be intrigued with comparisons between European reconciliation and regionalism and Northeast Asian prospects. He wants Japan to behave like Germany, atoning for its past in a similar fashion, and reconciling with China as Germany did with France. However many the parallels, this outlook has several pitfalls. First, Japan's view

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of its conduct in China, the Korean peninsula, and beyond is much more ambivalent than Germany's war memories. Second, the rise of China has no equivalent in Europe where regionalism could proceed without any country becoming dominant. Third, the US government's views of Europe during the cold war and Asia of late are diametrically opposed with regard to regionalism. Finally, South Korea's place in Northeast Asia as the third party to the core triangle as well as a divided country striving for reunification has no parallel in Europe. Yet, for Japan to pretend there are no parallels is short-sighted.

Indeed, Japan in late 2004 and 2005 made its most vigorous push for power since 1945 with insistence that the history issue has no more relevance. By the end of 2004 its campaign to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council was gaining momentum. As preparations for the East Asian Summit in December 2005 necessitated some critical choices, Japan grew assertive in opposing China's strategy. On the Six-Party Talks Japan took a harder line, shifting decisively toward the US and away from South Korea in three-way preparations. Finally, on historical revisionism Koizumi pressed further for standing firm on his Yasukuni visits and ignoring the views of others on related matters. In all respects, South Korean leaders were frustrated by the widening strategic gap with Japan and the failure, despite shuttle summits and all-around improvement in relations, to get Japanese leaders to consider the impact on their country.

South Korea made its boldest moves: to reach an accommodation with Japan on the revisionism issue in 1998, to take charge of the reunification issue with Japan as well as China encouraged to play supporting roles in 2000, to press for regionalism in a broad context in 2001 and then with a narrower emphasis in 2003; to stand against Japan's push to capitalize on UN reform by joining others in support of a "middle-

power” alternative in the winter of 2005; and then in the summer of 2005 to move into the forefront in preparations for the Six-Party Talks to reach a quick resolution of the nuclear crisis. In each case Japan not China contributed to thwarting the expectations of the South. Appeals were made to Japan, but South Koreans found their entreaties rebuffed. The message in 1998 was that the South Korean government would stop raising the history issue if Japan would stop making provocative moves over it. This was a way of reassuring those who blamed the South for “playing the history card” for some advantage that it would only be used in defense of national identity and dignity if Japan played it first for its own domestic nationalist agenda. The decision from the end of 2004 was to make the test for becoming a permanent member of the United Nations whether a country “enjoys the trust of its neighbors,” a warning to Japan to change its strategy.

The United Nations reform imbroglio of 2005 left South Koreans weighing their status in the hierarchy of world powers. The US obviously reigned as the first tier power, and China was methodically rising to become the second tier power. There would be no pretense of challenging them. Japan was a step lower, at the third tier, and its aspirations were suspect. If it became a permanent member of the Security Council, a new line would be drawn recognizing more than the current five great powers as a special set and leaving South Korea (and eventually a united Korea) on the other side. It would also make Japan more insistent on its special status as a leader in East Asia. For South Korea to keep the region and the globe in equilibrium, a sharp divide with Japan was not seen as positive. Instead, the fourth tier, where it is located as by 2007 the tenth economy in the world and on a trajectory to overtake a few above it, should find common ground with the third. Similar to Italy as a middle power located among countries long known

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as great powers, South Korea champions regionalism and balance within the region conducive to the voice of many rising above the voice of one or two. If the US and China are bound to be competitive, then if Japan throws its weight fully behind the US, regionalism cannot advance and South Korea has little choice but weak bandwagoning or alienation. If, however, Japan shows flexibility, the South can strive for a region in balance and an elevated voice for a middle power.

The concept of Asianism in Japan had troubled associations with leftist rejection of realism tied to the US and to the “friendship” mode of superficially cultivating ties without addressing the real barriers. In 2001-03 it survived with emphasis on regionalism and mitigating differences with China as linkages to South Korea prospered, but Tanaka Makiko’s inconsistent stint as foreign minister undercut it as did relentless attacks on the Foreign Ministry. Coordination with South Korea was sacrificed to the larger assault on a supposedly weak-willed approach to China and then North Korea. This is related to the identity confusion in Japan as well as value consciousness in a way that can only be described as contradictory. Now championing human rights and the spread of universal values as the key to global and regional cooperation, it has become more adamant in refusing to appraise its own historical conduct as a matter that reflects on current values. Chinese and South Koreans see this as hypocrisy. More cooperation is needed to shape an image of Asian regionalism that would reinforce forward-looking values in Japanese.

Although Koizumi in 2001-2003 showed some interest in regionalism through ASEAN + 3, he was less energetic than his predecessor Obuchi and failed to define Japan’s path. Mostly, he was playing catch-up to China in Southeast Asia. Increasingly, he left South Koreans in doubt that he was serious about “reentering Asia.” Identity

issues took priority: the shift in negotiating strategy toward Russia in favor of “four islands in a batch” from the spring of 2001, the abduction theme treated as North Korea’s challenge to Japan which had to stand up for its sovereignty from late 2002, the nebulous concept of a China “threat” intensifying sharply in 2004-05, and nonchalance to South Korean concerns in 2005 because of historical identity priorities. If Koizumi gained a measure of domestic popularity by stimulating domestic nationalism, he gave South Korea little room to maintain or repair relations. In 2005 Tokyo’s wariness over moves toward regionalism that may legitimize Beijing’s leadership left Seoul with few options.<sup>17</sup>

As long as North Korea loomed as a threat, Japanese-South Korean ties gained a boost, seen in 1969 when defense exchanges began and again in 1994 when the first nuclear crisis prompted more coordination. In 1998 when Japanese awakened to a serious North Korean threat, they were eager to carry this logic to a new stage and were inclined to view Kim Dae-jung’s support for this in the context of an all-around upgrading of relations as confirmation that South Koreans agreed. Yet, in fact the North was rapidly fading as a threat in the South. Instead of seeking support in isolating the North, the leaders in the South turned their attention to ways to persuade the North of the benefits of reconciliation as well of how others would contribute to the unification process. This gave the edge to China and posed new challenges for relations with Japan.<sup>18</sup> With some in South Korea still fearful of Japanese militarism or at least doubtful that Japan would welcome a united Korea less dependent on the US, it should have been clear to Japanese and Americans alike that the burden was on Japan to win the trust of its former colony. A strategic error occurred when the Bush administration ignored this psychology in favor of whole-hearted support for Japan’s leadership role in

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Asian security and assumed that it could steer Japanese-South Korean ties toward a full-fledged security triangle.

The strategic gap between Tokyo and Seoul widened in October 2002 with the decision not to return the five abductees allowed by Kim Jong-il to visit Japan along with an intense effort to convince them that Japan would find a way to bring out their family members. Acceding to public preoccupation with the abduction issue, Koizumi stepped back from his September engagement with Kim, which occurred even after he had been informed of the secret uranium enrichment program. This broke with the South Korean approach and dashed North Korean hopes for sustained talks leading to normalization, which had produced the admission of abductions. While to June 2004 Seoul and Tokyo were able to maintain some coordination toward Pyongyang, the gap was great and was prone to expand as it did when Koizumi sided more fully with Bush, who was hardening his stance after the third round of talks in June 2004.

South Korea and Japan have reached a crossroads over clashing views of security in Northeast Asia. The South favors a process of transition from hub and spokes alliances centered on the US to a regional system incorporating China and also Russia. Japan seeks a more robust alliance with the US in which South Korea adds its weight but does not have a major voice. Management of North Korean relations differs not only because of the Korean fraternal connection but also due to the contrasting regional strategies.

Revisionism in Japan and South Korea takes different forms. In Japan it means, among other things, clarifying historical judgments on the period 1905-45 in Japanese-Korean relations. These include: 1) the 1905 treaty to register Takeshima as Japanese territory was not a forced agreement by an imperialist power, but a valid treaty that

should have established continued Japanese control rather than being ignored after the war as Korea asserted its control over Dokdo; 2) the 1910 annexation of Korea by Japan was not coerced but a voluntary decision; and 3) the purpose and impact of Japanese rule over 35 years should be judged as largely positive, protecting Korea from predators such as Russia and enabling its economic development and initial all-around modernization. In Korea revisionism largely takes the form of clarifying historical judgments on the period 1945-87 with consequences for delving deeper into developments under Japan's occupation. In 2004 the issue of investigating who had collaborated with the Japanese came to the fore with an obvious message that their advantages continued in the postwar era and helped to shape the formation of an elite of dubious legitimacy. In 2005 attention turned to the 1965 normalization treaty and the need not only to reassess it but also to renegotiate it. Newly unclassified documents revealed clearly that Korean atomic bomb victims were not included in the negotiations over economic assistance in lieu of reparations as the military dictatorship run by collaborators absolved Japan of future indemnity of victims in return for \$500 million in economic assistance.<sup>19</sup>

Reminders of the end of the war in 1945 cast a dark shadow on its sixtieth anniversary. South Koreans recalled the unsatisfactory normalization of relations with Japan in January and again in August when archival documents from 1965 were released as well as in February and March when the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute was reignited. Japanese faced the war legacy also when Koizumi at the last minute decided to join other world leaders in Russia's victory celebration on May 9, while Russians and Chinese lauded Germany but not Japan as a country that had reflected deeply on its aggressive actions and taken responsibility before international society.<sup>20</sup> This division



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will be hard to overcome, but it should not be allowed to stymie efforts to improve relations.

The 1965 normalization of relations with Japan remains an embarrassment in South Korea in contrast to the 1992 normalization of relations with China. Japan has had forty years to appreciate South Korean emotions and find ways to ameliorate them. Yet, when in January 2005 following a court order the South released the historical documents detailing the negotiations in 1965 Japan did nothing to calm matters. If the response of Koreans mainly blamed the Park Chung-hee government for abandoning the interests of Japan's victims, Japan was blamed too. Adding to the inflammatory effects were its provocative moves over the territorial dispute and textbooks that soon followed.

In the current atmosphere of uncertainty and frustration, minor matters on the scale of regional diplomacy can set off a chain reaction. The 1999 fishing agreement between Japan and South Korea came on the heels of the historic Kim Dae-jung summit in Tokyo and accompanied an upturn in naval cooperation as well as bilateral relations in general. Yet, somehow, the fishermen of Shimane prefecture found their hopes dashed in gaining the expected access to the waters around Dokdo/Takeshima. In contrast to the just preceding agreement with Russia on fishing around the four disputed islands north of Hokkaido, where Japanese local communities realized many benefits—many customers in their shops, cheap consumer prices for Russian exports, and good access to fish even if the cost to the Japanese government is considerable—, resentment in Shimane grew and led to political action in February and March 2005. This became the one provocation that changed Roh's approach from forbearance to anger and assault on the cornerstones of the bilateral relationship with Japan. With the sharpness of his response in March and the far-reaching critique of the entire process of bilateral

normalization since 1965, Roh undercut moderates in Japan. When Koizumi after some restraint in order to find a way to rebuild relations went to Seoul in June, Roh again pressed him hard on the history issue. A minor matter had become a full-blown retreat in bilateral relations.

While ostensibly the critical difference between Japan and South Korea is over the four decades to 1945, the two decades from 1965 now figure into disagreements too. Roh Moo-hyun in March 2005 made 1965 the centerpiece in criticizing the failure to normalize relations in the true sense. In turn, *Sankei shimbun* accused South Koreans of having a “self-destructive” historical perspective by not appreciating the value of what was gained in 1965, bringing Japanese capital and technology along with infrastructure, while praising the normalization with China in 1992 in glowing terms.<sup>21</sup> Appreciative of Park Chung-hee’s development orientation and strategic outlook, Japanese tend to set aside his dictatorship and affronts to Korean national identity.

Joint research on historical issues and on textbooks continues to be a convenient stalling device that suggests progress will be made in reaching mutual understanding. Yet, the main area where efforts have proceeded to narrow differences is coverage of distant history. Discussion of the annexation treaty that cost Korea its independence only arouses fierce disputes. The subject of territorial disputes is too sensitive even to raise.<sup>22</sup> As the specter spreads of increased hostility over revisionist themes, we should give no credence to more joint commissions or publication projects along these lines.

Roh’s restraint toward Japan in 2003-04 was a continuation of the strategy of Kim Dae-jung for balanced and positive relations with all four great powers active in the region. The South saw its role as promoting cooperation in the region, treating any moves to relieve tensions as a step toward its goals of crisis resolution, gradual

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reunification, and regionalism. After striving to give the impression of strategic agreement in June 2003, coordination in the spring of 2004 was somewhat renewed. Koizumi went to Pyongyang not only to retrieve the family members and with a wish to boost the LDP's political fortunes before the July elections to the Upper House, but also with aspirations to reassert Japan in the strategic hunt as an active force in the Six-Party Talks. In this context he sided with Roh in urging the US to be more flexible, leading to some movement at the third round of talks. Suddenly, Japan was not just seconding the US position, but it was repositioning itself with an independent line to the North and renewed coordination with the South. This posture, however, faded by the fall. In the face of Bush's reelection and Koizumi's assertiveness toward Russia over four disputed islands (just before Roh went to Moscow for a warm summit with Putin), toward North Korea on the abductees, and toward China, Roh knew that his soft line was failing.

At the first summit of the new shuttle diplomacy the message from Seoul was that it wanted cooperation on the North Korean nuclear issue. Having just lent his support to the effort to persuade the US to be more flexible in the third round of Six-Party Talks and no longer facing so much public indignation over the abductee question, Koizumi was thought to be ready for a more active role between the US and South Korea as well as eager to boost ties with the South. With increased trust a central theme in preparing for the fortieth anniversary of normalization and FTA talks scheduled to reach agreement in 2005 too, the July 21-22 summit was positively anticipated.<sup>23</sup> Yet, failure to sustain cooperation in dealing with North Korea started the descent in bilateral relations.

At the June 20, 2005 summit in Seoul, apart from Roh's lengthy lecture on history that only exposed the well-known gulf between the two sides, the second issue

facing Roh and Koizumi was the North Korean crisis and how to restart the Six-Party Talks. Already in the midst of an intense effort, approved by the US, to lure the North back to the talks, Roh was positive about the prospects and interested in winning Japan's backing. Yet, Koizumi allegedly was dismissing the initiative and urging Roh to pressure the North as the way to proceed. While one side was striving to "rescue" the talks with a "win-win outcome," the other saw this approach as playing into the stalling tactics of the North.<sup>24</sup>

This summit harmed both countries. The tone was negative, coverage was critical, and there were no redeeming benefits as relations kept deteriorating. Instead of a forward focus, talks were mired in contentious historical issues. For Koizumi it was one more sign, after a series of blows in relations with China, North Korea, and Russia, of isolation in Northeast Asia. For Roh it was tantamount to the loss of the Japanese leg in Korea's regional strategy.<sup>25</sup> Japanese were perplexed after the World Cup spirit of 2002, the Korea wave of 2003, and the shuttle diplomacy of 2004 that relations could have deteriorated so far. Koreans faulted Japan's provocations, finding no explanation for them in its national interests. The upshot was language rarely heard in diplomatic settings about not being able to trust Japan in the future and seeming indifference on the Japanese side.

Japanese analysis of Roh's strategy articulated on February 24, 2005 for South Korea to become a Northeast Asian balancer suggested that it was based on ambition and an effort to boost national power. It is associated with a shift away from pro-US thinking and a belief that the US and China must build an all-around peaceful order in Northeast Asia. Moreover, it is rooted in discussions among Roh's advisors from the second half of 2004 in search of a future vision and in reflections on more than 100

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years of Korean history marked by frictions among great powers striving for hegemony with the peninsula serving as the axis of their efforts. Through resolution of the nuclear crisis, Roh seeks to use the experience of the Six-Party negotiating process to proceed to a peace and security discussion for the region.<sup>26</sup> While the article focuses on explaining what Roh's advisors, especially Lee Jong-seok who was about to become Unification Minister, have in mind with the concept of "balancer," it highlights assumptions that would be likely to arouse doubts among Japanese about the feasibility of such aspirations.

South Korea had long been subject to a dual assault from the Japanese right and left wing, accounting for a situation where in the 1980s the percentage of Japanese feeling friendly toward China was roughly double that feeling friendly to the South. Even after South Korea became democratic and China experienced the Tiananmen brutality, the gap until the end of the 1990s remained substantially in China's favor. Only as views of China took a downturn from 2003 and those of South Korea steadily climbed did the new preference clearly emerge<sup>27</sup>. Yet, many on the right insisted that South Koreans were driven by anti-Japanese sentiments and, increasingly, were blindly pro-Pyongyang.<sup>28</sup> Rather than the downturn in official relations in 2005 leading to national soul-searching on how to renew the long-sought momentum in relations, the right seized on this chance to reinforce its message of hopelessness in which Japan bore no responsibility.

A public opinion survey in the summer of 2005 showed the depth of the strategic gap between Japan and South Korea. Whereas Koreans are confused about the source of threat in East Asia—mentioning the US, China, Japan, and North Korea in fairly equal numbers (17-24 percent each)--, Japanese are focused on the dual threat of North Korea

and China (37-38 percent each). Japanese are almost twice as prone as South Koreans (42 versus 23 percent) to find the other's handling of the nuclear crisis a problem interfering with bilateral cooperation, while South Koreans are well over twice as likely to view the other country in unfriendly or not very friendly terms (66 versus 28 percent).<sup>29</sup>

Japanese media are filled with stories about how Chinese communist leaders stir anti-Japanese emotions, as in the demonstrations of April 2005, to boost their legitimacy, and Roh Moo-hyun fanned an anti-Japanese hard-line message in order to overcome low approval ratings that threatened to make him a lame-duck president before half his term was over.<sup>30</sup> In turn, Roh's March 1, 2006 speech as his speech a year earlier on the same day of commemoration of the liberation movement concentrated on criticisms of Japan, reiterating the usual three-part set of Yasukuni, textbooks, and the territorial dispute.<sup>31</sup> Even if Roh claims that raising such themes is not fanning anti-Japanese sentiments but just the first step toward a mature relationship,<sup>32</sup> the result is only to deepen the divide.

The Japanese right wing links anti-Japanese and pro-North Korean emotions in South Korea, suggesting that the downturn in 2005 in views of Japan was essentially beyond Japan's control and linked to fanatical patriotism that can be traced back at least to the World Cup soccer fans.<sup>33</sup> In the more strident criticisms of Japan launched in the Chinese press, including *People's Daily* in 2005, there were accusations that right wing forces there were not interested in a peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis because of their obsession with making Japan a military great power.<sup>34</sup> And in on-line Korean sources such as *Naeil shiron* Roh's March 2005 tirades against Japan were welcomed as long overdue and completely provoked by the sharp turn in Japanese foreign policy as

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seen in Shimane prefecture's intensification of territorial claims against Dokdo (Takeshima) and numerous other actions.<sup>35</sup> Extreme mutual accusations are lowering the potential for overcoming problems in regional relations. The idea that confrontational tactics are desirable because they convey real intentions and put an end to past evasions has become popular to the dismay of diplomats interested in reducing tensions.<sup>36</sup> The notion that attitudes in other countries have become so extreme, such as that 95 percent of South Koreans see a possibility for the revival of Japanese militarism, that no middle ground can be found suits zealous nationalists on each side.<sup>37</sup>

Ironically, Japanese-South Korean relations have deteriorated over strategic relations even as emotional anti-Japanese views in Korea and discrimination against Koreans in Japan have declined.<sup>38</sup> The advice of Japanese diplomats was to make some concessions and keep the situation under control, but the response of Koizumi has been to disregard the Koreans and even to support aggressive accusations from his own staff. This has been aided by right-wing distortions of why the Roh administration does not understand Japan without adequate response. Arguments range from leftist thinking leading Roh and others to struggle for an identity pro-North and pro China to a crisis in popularity for Roh in which he turns to anti-Japanese demagoguery<sup>39</sup> South Koreans need to engage the Japanese media and politicians more to counter such simplistic reasoning.

### **South Korean-Chinese Relations**

In November 1995 when Jiang Zemin visited Seoul a joint news conference in which Kim Young-sam joined him in lambasting Japanese handling of history gave the impression, which was earlier conveyed by the Korean ambassador to China, that a tilt toward China was occurring. This did not serve South Korean diplomacy well, and care has been taken to avoid any repetition. Managing the triangle starts with avoidance of a disruptive tilt, but it has become more complicated as China's inexorable rise continues.<sup>40</sup>

Roh is not close to China, but he used the unspoken prospect of increased ties to China to gain leverage on the US. If the meaning of "balancer" is to forge an equidistant triangle with China and the US while relegating Japan to the sidelines, this would be an exaggerated notion of South Korea's leverage. Yet, Roh has been careful not to assert plans for drawing closer to China or promoting its role in a multilateral context, denying critics a clear target to be used against his strategic reasoning. In 2005 it appeared that China and South Korea had found common ground. In March and April they experienced parallel, and some would say reinforcing, outcries against Japanese revisionist history and matters thought to be linked to it. In the summer they complemented each other in steering the Six-Party Talks toward the compromises that led to the Joint Statement. When Japan pressed its campaign to become a permanent member of the Security Council, these two states railed against it. Finally, in October they each responded vehemently to Koizumi's Yasukuni visit, followed in December by agreement not to meet with him at the ASEAN + 3 and EAS summits. Even as this strategic convergence was occurring, however, both South Korea and China were careful not to suggest that it meant much. This was a prudent approach to those



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suspiciously alert to their behavior and an accurate reflection of the realities of Northeast Asia.

Consensus is greater on managing relations with China than with Japan. Having worked hard to normalize ties with China and still concerned that China might tilt more to North Korea, South Koreans are largely in agreement to tread cautiously. Even if there may be occasional differences of opinion, few warn about China's motives or press for steps to criticize that country. In contrast, diplomat professionals in the South repeatedly struggle to calm uproars over Japan and reassert realist thinking. It may be that the South Korean public and politicians too are gradually responding to sharp downturns in Japan's image more calmly, but the cycle of outrage followed by gradual calming continues. Each president takes office, moves to mend or improve relations with Japan, and then faces in mid-term a sharp downturn that, only with great effort, can be slowly repaired. There was talk that the cycle had ended in 1998, but in 2001 Japanese textbooks set off another round. In the face of the North Korean nuclear crisis and the explosive rise of Chinese power, some suggested that the cycle was over after Roh Moo-hyun took office attentive to stable relations, but in 2005 another spike of inflammatory rhetoric occurred. Even after much success in 1998-2004 in cultural as well as security normalization with economic ties remaining an obvious success, relations proved vulnerable to a new crisis. In contrast, despite the garlic war with China in 2000 and the Goguryeo historical controversy in 2004, relations with China have remained on a remarkably even keel.

South Korea needs to be realistic about Japan's emerging role in Asia and not make futile responses that could benefit China most. To do this it must distinguish between a realist Japan determined to upgrade its military as a defensive force and an

ally with the US and a revisionist Japan obsessed with altering verdicts on history. The former can be accepted as a partner if not an ally. The latter can be further resisted as a provocateur but not a threat. Care should be taken to avoid the sort of downward slide that followed when China overreacted to Japan in the mid-90s. Realistic South Koreans recognize that China's rise poses a greater danger to an independent, balanced foreign policy for the South than does Japan's groping for a place in Asia. The challenge is to maneuver between the two. Japan has not made that easy.

The campaign by some Japanese authorities such as Nishihara Masao president of Defense University to transfer the blame of revisionism to the Chinese complicates South Korea's task. After the April demonstrations Nishihara agreed with Foreign Minister Machimura's demands for a Chinese apology and compensation for damages in the April demonstrations, charging that China's strategy is to block the expansion of Japanese military power and of Japanese influence in Asia in order to build its own superior position there. He added that Koizumi had been too weak, strengthening Japan's tendency of friendship diplomacy in order to avoid offending China. In contrast, he contends that China's erroneous history spread through more than 200 museums around the country commemorating the war of resistance against Japan exaggerates past misdeeds.<sup>41</sup> This way of thinking can only drive Chinese and South Koreans closer together.

There is a danger that in part as a result of Japanese insensitivity South Koreans will view the Japanese shift to the right as continuity with the historic emperor system while overlooking the legacy of communism in China and elsewhere that brought the Korean War and much suffering. This leads to erroneous reasoning that Japan's system is more of a threat to peace and collective prosperity in Northeast Asia than is China's.<sup>42</sup>

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China is better at concealing its revisionist inclinations than Japan and those sentiments would not tap the same reservoir of victimization in South Korea. For China restoring normality in historical perspective may signify seeking a return to the vertical order in imperial times, redressing the verdicts on the international system and its victims during the era of imperialism, and also contributing to a positive reassessment of the role of socialism from the Bolshevik Revolution through Maoist rule and the Tiananmen suppression of “counterrevolutionaries.” South Koreans can sympathize with at least some of China’s rethinking of the international system and imperialism, and they have yet to absorb the full challenge of the values that may be propounded by Chinese communists even if they recognized in the 2004 uproar over China’s claim to Goguryeo a warning of historical contestation. As lively as South Korean debates over the US, Japan, and North Korea have been, the debate over China remained much quieter. Even the realization in 2005 that while others were debating how to proceed with talks China was forging closer ties to North Korea, however much it aroused the South to redouble its own efforts with the North, did not produce a substantial debate.

Chinese are forging a continental strategy, appealing to South Korea to join. In contrast, Japanese are distancing their country from it, seeking to counter with a maritime strategy reliant on the US, and calling on South Korea to complete the alliance structure from the cold war. This tug-of-war has many dimensions, each of which demands a response from the South. We can discern economics, security, and culture at work, and not always in synch with each other. In all areas South Korea is best off finding a balance between the two sides, but this is not easily maintained. Economically, China is becoming the principal trading partner, but to a great extent this represents imports of South Korean parts for assembly in order to export to the US and Japan. The

stability of Chinese economic growth is not so certain nor the ability of South Korea to retain the advantage in its few cutting edge industries for any tilt to be advisable. In security unpredictability of North Korean behavior as well as of China's rise make it important for South Korea to cling to the US alliance and even to use restraint in distancing itself from Japan. Finally, cultural issues—mixing universal human values, regional history issues, and new popular

Japanese have concentrated since 1998 and especially under Koizumi on strengthening ties with South Korea first and addressing the triangle with China later. This has been their thinking about establishing FTAs and about security. While the Korean school is a much less visible entity in the Foreign Ministry, comprised of about twenty experts whose highest position is likely to be Deputy Director of the Asia Department, it too has been subject to criticisms of being soft on its object of study along with the Russian and Chinese schools. Since the directors of the department in recent years have been security specialists without Korean language or expertise, the voice of Korea has not easily reached the highest levels. Moreover, the decline of the political left within the LDP removed influential figures with close ties to members of South Korea's National Assembly and also some linkages to North Korea. As in the case of China, the Hasegawa faction had played the leading role; so its rapid eclipse under Koizumi negatively affected relations. In contrast, the right wing of the LDP was known for criticisms of South Korea as well as the North and before becoming galvanized over the kidnapping issue had been suspicious about the Sunshine Policy. Associated with the journal *Gendai Koriya*, many on the right hesitated to embrace the positive mood from the Kim Dae-jung summit in 1998 or the World Cup in 2002. Historical themes had long preoccupied their thinking. For instance, they could not forgive South Koreans for

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ignoring that Japan taught them what a modernized society is and were brainwashing young Koreans into anti-Japanese sentiments.<sup>43</sup> Japanese should recognize that South Korea's ties with China gain from this way of dealing with the two countries.

Repeatedly, when Chinese or South Korean leaders sought Japanese cooperation in boosting relations they were disappointed by Koizumi's response. For a time even Koizumi's insistence on visiting the Yasukuni Shrine was treated as something that could be overcome by achieving an understanding for the future. When Koizumi encouraged China by visiting and lending the weight of his office to the new Boao forum in April 2002 and in December 2003 when he joined Bush in cautioning Chen Shuibian against going ahead with a provocative referendum, Chinese leaders staked their own prestige on working with him toward a forward-looking agenda. But each time Koizumi wasted no time in making another visit to Yasukuni and, thus, undercutting them at home. This lack of interest in working with China leaves no room for South Korea's triangular dexterity.

The downswing in Sino-Japanese relations is rooted in strategic differences such as Chinese concern that the February 2005 2 + 2 statement made Taiwan a strategic target for Japan and also Japan's United Nations Security Council ambitions. New assertiveness over the territorial dispute with South Korea was interpreted in the Chinese press as part of a three-pronged attack reported in Japan as: in the north over the Northern Territories, in the west over Takeshima, and in the south over the Senkaku islands.<sup>44</sup> Yet, South Koreans should be cautious about making common cause over territory. They need to keep their eyes on the big strategic picture, especially since their control over Dokdo (Takeshima) is secure and secondary considering the serious problems they face.

On the three major diplomatic issues facing Seoul in 2005 both government and public reasoning was much closer to Beijing's than Tokyo's. Preparing for the fourth and fifth rounds of the Six-Party Talks, the consensus in South Korea was to engage the North more fully along lines proposed by China as mediator rather than the US as antagonist. On the United Nations Security Council reforms to be debated in the fall, the consensus was to oppose an expansion of permanent members with Japan entitled to a seat, making a moral argument similar to that in China about the inadequacy of reflecting on history. And on the East Asian Summit as well as the preceding ASEAN + 3 session in December, South Koreans approved energetic efforts to forge regionalism parallel to those favored by China but at odds with the wariness in Japan. While Roh at the end of 2004 in Los Angeles and Paris gave speeches that may have exaggerated what Seoul could achieve by asserting its moral leadership and claim to be a balancer,<sup>45</sup> he was giving voice to the concerns of a nation that saw itself stymied by these interconnected strategic issues.

North Korea's cooperation with the Sunshine Policy and later the Six-Party Talks was at all points linked to substantial economic enticements from China as well as South Korea. Sino-North Korean consultations began in earnest early 2000 and at the end of May when Kim Jong-il went to China grain assistance was greatly increased. With this upgrading of ties to the North, China managed simultaneously to increase its influence over the South. From the time of normalization in 1992 China had made it clear to the South that it would maintain balanced political ties with both Koreas. It took the North's sensitivities into account, refusing for instance to allow a consul general from the South to be stationed in Shenyang until a consular office was established in 1999. Concern centered in part on competition for influence between the two that would

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lead to instability as well as to the possible impact of South Korean thinking on the Korean community in the region. Yet, ties advanced smoothly and once the full triangle was joined in 2000 China's position at the fulcrum acquired new importance. Japan's role in the triangle with the US added to its political clout in Seoul, but not as much as China's role in the triangle with North Korea did from 2000.

The foundation of globalization is too weak to support regionalism in Northeast Asia. The Japanese appeal for internationalization (*kokusaika*) in the 1980s was narrowly focused and limited in its political impact. The South Korean call for globalization (*seggyehwa*) in the 1990s was cut short by the Asian financial crisis and then overtaken by an inward-looking 386 generation newly grappling with reunification as a theme. And the murmurs of early globalization in China before June 4 1989 became targets of a Communist Party backlash and only narrowly advanced as an economic strategy without any parallel to 2006 to the earlier debates in Japan and South Korea. All of these issues are poignant given the unresolved national identity issues: for Japan of how to interpret defeat in 1945; for South Korea of how to reconcile dependency on other powers with brotherhood for national recovery; and for China of how to interpret the rise of national power under Communist Party control that has caused so much harm to the nation.

Chinese have been reluctant to acknowledge the emergence of a triangle with Seoul in the middle between Beijing and Tokyo. As this pattern emerged in ASEAN + 3 and to some extent with Kim Dae-jung's centrality through the Sunshine Policy, it drew little attention in China. Instead, it was China's emergence at the center that mattered. In regionalism China's growing ties with Southeast Asia became the focus. In the Six-Party Talks China was host and intermediary, solidifying its role as the natural filter

between North and South. With Russia cooperating closely and the US requiring China's help, the broad geopolitical framework left no room for taking seriously the small East Asian triangle in which South Korea might wield some leverage. Strategic thinking centered on great powers eclipsed regional maneuvering of a secondary nature.

China needs reassurance that Japan is not joining those in the US inclined to contain it, even if that is not the official policy, and especially that it does not support Taiwan's formal independence. Japan needs from China indications that it is not trying to dominate regionalism and to override Taiwanese concerns that human rights and foreign balance against possible Chinese misuse of power will be lost. South Korea can play an active role in managing the triangle on the basis of both sides giving minimal assurances. Otherwise, it will be relegated to struggling to fill the gap by reducing tensions. This may require an even more deft hand in working with China's leadership that lacks the habit of seeking South Korea's counsel or the shadow of the US looming behind the Japanese-South Korean relationship. While forthright responses to Japan's behavior are engrained, the South may need new tools for subtly influencing China's behavior. The geopolitics of the Korean nuclear crisis have so far exposed a wider gap with Japan than with China,<sup>46</sup> but the reunification process would likely reveal sharp competition between China and South Korea as the two most active economic partners and influences on the North.

## **Conclusion**



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South Korea faces two unexpected realities that make its adjustment difficult. First, the rise of China with considerable support from Russia and possible new linkages with North Korea is creating a continental powerhouse beyond what was imagined in the 1990s. Second, the unshakeable, increasingly robust alliance between the US and Japan is making it clear that a sharp dividing line will exist in maritime Asia. It is becoming more challenging to find middle ground between these two forces. There is no escaping this duality for a country whose primary interest has become to work with both sides and bring others together while limiting its dependency on one or another country.

National interests should converge on a three-country FTA spurring further economic integration and growth, an East Asian community with regionalism focused on harmonizing different national identities, and coordination to resolve threats of instability or even war from the North Korean nuclear weapons programs and the US determination to eliminate them. In 2005, however, when all of these issues faced urgent decisions, lines of division widened. The FTA talks between Japan and South Korea were frozen, the East Asian Summit (EAS) started on a sour note as China and Japan battled over its role, and the Six-Party Talks after a ray of hope in the Joint Statement of September 19 were on the verge of collapse at year's end. The dilemma for South Korea became more serious.

China and Japan as well as South Korea are seeking increased power in Asia. All considered the cold war era an anomaly, when their power aspirations were not met. Japan was struggling with the legacy of a defeated power that had to prove itself first economically and rely on the US before "reentering Asia." South Korea was part of a divided country that awaited the end of the cold war while depending on the US alliance.

And China was subject to containment as a communist state until a breakthrough with the US gave it a chance to shift its strategy and begin integration into the world economy as the path to asserting political power and regaining Taiwan. All three countries find that they are not alone in seeking increased power in Asia, limited in some ways by the US strategy in the region, and in need of Asian partners.

The fundamental difference in East Asia is not over history but over the balance of power in the region. China is rising and seeks a balance with multilateral power and regionalism that can limit the US's alliances and security hegemony. Japan is in limbo without the expected regional leadership but determined to rise as a political power on the back of its US alliance and nationalist cohesion. That leaves South Korea in the middle unprepared to abandon its own place in the US alliance system while the future of North Korea is uncertain but inclined to cooperate with China in forging a multilateral structure that balances rival claims to power and embraces regionalism. The North Korean nuclear crisis exacerbates these differences in strategic thinking. Moves by Taiwan's government to assert sovereignty rather than discuss with China steps toward reunification open other wounds over which Japan has become no less attentive than the US. In the year 2005 the main story appeared to be an historical chasm with the Yasukuni Shrine at the center, but behind the scenes the driving force was geopolitics.

The immediate challenges for the region are to achieve maximum consensus to resolved the nuclear crisis and exert influence on North Korea for long-term regional stability and to prevent regional polarization into a US-Japan alliance and a China-centered group. Both of these challenges put South Korea in the middle, but it lacks standing to shape any outcome until major changes occur in the other countries. The Sunshine Policy brought not only growing consensus in the South on a need to engage

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the North but also a vision of multilateral security in Northeast Asia that would allow Koreans for the first time in history, after failed attempts from the 1880s to 1905, to become an active force in shaping great power relations related to the peninsula and regional cooperation.<sup>47</sup> With hopes elevated in 2000 by US encouragement and Sino-Japanese cooperation through ASEAN + 3, Seoul was reluctant to accept the Bush or Koizumi image that had become increasingly clear by 2005 of a divided region where its only realistic option was again to become dependent on the US with Japan gaining a larger say. Yet, until the US and China agree on the basic contours of power sharing and, in the process, a new approach is tried toward North Korea, South Korea has little prospect of managing the Sino-Japanese triangle effectively.

Given the assertive and often obstinate Bush diplomacy and the irrepressible rise of China, Japan and South Korea could have much to gain through coordination as middle powers caught between two poles. Instead, they have been pulled apart, Japan throwing its whole-hearted support behind the US rather than seeking middle ground between it and South Korea, let alone it and China, and South Korea shifting sharply toward China instead of trying to keep a balance between it and Japan with the US remaining a steady anchor. Both are losers from their loss of coordination. Although Roh bears some responsibility for overreacting, Koizumi and Bush may be more responsible for the deterioration in 2005 of this triangular foundation for Northeast Asian cooperation based on US-led multilateralism, democratic values, and pragmatic realist considerations.

When states exaggerate their own power strategic miscalculations occur. The Bush administration drastically overestimated US power, while confusing its priorities setting global politics reeling. Koizumi is widely accused of misjudging Japan's options

in Asia, damaging prospects for cooperation in that region. Roh's impact has been more limited, but in 2005 there is reason to think that he overestimated South Korea's leverage. He insisted that Korea, including both sides of the peninsula, is no longer a weak power that is the object of rivalry stuck between the great powers. Arguing that South Korea is a force with an increasingly independent defense capacity with which others must reckon, he failed to explain how the South would get the US to take its position on North Korea more seriously, why China would raise the ire of North Korea by consulting closely with the South on strategic matters, or why Japan would even resume the modest coordination of 2004. Roh's response to difficult circumstances did not bring positive results.

Personal relations have contributed greatly to reestablishing ties and overcoming hurdles that keep arising in Northeast Asia. Yet, along with attacks on diplomats as if they are easily vulnerable to being "captured" by the other side, we observe a frontal assault on officials and politicians who aspire to be "pipes" friendly to their counterparts.<sup>48</sup> Also earlier emphasis on letting the other side have some "face" and showing respect for its deepest feelings seems to be brushed aside in favor of defending one's national interests. Managing relations is now more difficult. There is no reason to think that South Korean politicians, even if conservatives were to take power in 2008, can overcome this problem.

Apart from a minority who support strong triangular ties with the US and Japan, South Korean conservatives frantically search for middle ground as they blame all sides for the gloomy prospect of a conflict-ridden region in Northeast Asia. Goguryeo claims by China as well as "vulgar nationalism" seen in demonstrations against Japan confirm the "rough manner" of a Communist Party dictatorship wielding great power. Yet, the

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rise of right wing nationalists in Japan who resuscitate war criminals of the past clashes with any inclination to give Japanese credit for being the “most developed democracy and the champion of human rights in Asia.” In addition, the strategy of US neoconservatives and pressure for Japan to join as well as for South Korea to follow cannot be embraced since it sets the region on a collision course. It is beyond any strategizing to indicate how South Korean can overcome these regional complexities while actively pursuing reunification with North Korea and playing the leading role in cooperation and reconciliation.<sup>49</sup> By the end of 2004 conservatives had largely endorsed engagement with the North, but they had trouble differentiating their approach for sustaining it from Roh’s. Faulting Roh for alienating the US and overreacting to Japan, they could not propose a viable alternative.

South Korea, even under a conservative president, is unlikely to give up its interest in regionalism and reconciliation. Japan has an opportunity to shape that process and pull the South back toward balanced ties in the region. If it persists on the course Koizumi has set, South Korea will likely drift closer to China. Just at the time when the South faces a crossroads, Japan should not be pressing its own historical revisionism and dismissing the South’s security concerns. Both Tokyo and Seoul should recognize that Japan has little prospect of “reentering Asia” without South Korea at its side and South Korea has little chance to play a flexible, bridging role in Asia without good relations with both China and Japan as well as the US. Roh has used terms such as “independent country,” “balancer,” “coordinator,” or “strategic flexibility” while insisting that the alliance with the US is safe. Alienation from Japan risks ties with the US and makes all of those concepts fanciful, even in the modified forms that they can be restated.

To define Seoul's role in the triangle we might choose the term "facilitator." When the Sino-US relationship enables regional cooperation to go forward and both Beijing and Tokyo welcome a third, non-threatening party to smooth their ties, Seoul should be prepared to promote cooperation. At other times it should keep a low profile and do what it can to encourage a more positive outlook on all sides. Given the likely lasting divide between the US and Japan on one side and China, Russia, and North Korea on the other, the South should avoid the temptation of casting its lot with the continental group as a means of speeding reunification, which would be unlikely or at least not occur on favorable terms. Yet, it also cannot serve its national interests well by rubberstamping US and Japan views that harden the region's divide. Instead, it faces the challenge of striving to bring the parties closer together. To do this it must keep in perspective on the one side Japan's offensive treatment of history and excessive US alliance demands and on the other side North Korea's provocative outbursts and China's potential for regional dominance. It will take expert analysis and management of contending powers, especially China and Japan, to put South Korea on course to facilitate regional reconciliation and a rise in its own quiet influence beyond what was possible over the past 1300 years.

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- <sup>2</sup> *Mainichi shimbun*, June 9, 2005, p. 6.
- <sup>3</sup> *Yomiuri shimbun*, June 10, 2005, p. 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Charles Armstrong, Gilbert Rozman, Samuel S. Kim, and Stephen Kotkin, eds., *Korea at the Center: Dynamics of Regionalism in Northeast Asia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006).
- <sup>5</sup> Gilbert Rozman, “Japan and South Korea: Should the U.S. Be Worried about Their New Spat in 2001?” *Pacific Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2002, pp. 1-28.
- <sup>6</sup> Gilbert Rozman, *Northeast Asia’s Stunted Regionalism: Bilateral Distrust in the Shadow of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- <sup>7</sup> *Mainichi shimbun*, July 2, 2002, p. 3
- <sup>8</sup> Tai Hwan Lee, “Chinese Foreign Relations in Northeast Asia,” in Sang-woo Rhee and Tae-hyo Kim, eds., *Korea-Japan Security Relations: Prescriptive Studies*, (Seoul: New Asia Research Institute, 2000) pp., 43-68.
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- <sup>10</sup> Kan Choi, “Korea-Japan Security Cooperation in the Post-Unification Era: Breaking the Barriers,” in Sang-woo Rhee and Tae-hyo Kim, eds., *Korea-Japan Security Relations: Prescriptive Studies*, pp. 213-30.
- <sup>11</sup> “Nitchu no mizo wa uzumarunoka,” *Gaiko Forum*, July 2007, pp. 10-21.
- <sup>12</sup> Yi Chongsan, “Gyunhyongja oigyo oa Hanmi dongmaeng oe patan,” *Wolgan Chosun*, May 2005, pp.?
- <sup>13</sup> Kohari Susumu, “Roh Moo-hyun seiken wa naze ‘tainichi kyoko’ ni natta noka?” *Sekai shuho*, June 7, 2005, pp. 50-51

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- <sup>14</sup> *Mainichi shimbun*, May 8, 2005, p. 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo, and Joseph P. Ferguson, eds., *Japanese Strategic Thought toward Asia* (New York: Palgrave, forthcoming).
- <sup>16</sup> *21 segi oe Han-II goangye: chigum, muos ul haeyahal gos inga?* (Seoul: Asia yongu kigum, 2003).
- <sup>17</sup> Gilbert Rozman, “New Challenges in the Regional Integration of China and Japan in 2005,” in Li Enmin, ed., *The Possibility of an East Asian Community: Rethinking the Sino-Japanese Relationship* (Tokyo: Ochanomizu shobo, 2006), pp. 385-406.
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- <sup>19</sup> *The Korea Herald*, June 17, 2005, p. 2.
- <sup>20</sup> *Sankei shimbun*, May 9, 2005, p. 3.
- <sup>21</sup> *Sankei shimbun*, July 1, 2005, p.1.
- <sup>22</sup> *Asahi shimbun*, June 28, 2005, pp. 2, 3.
- <sup>23</sup> *Hokkaido shimbun*, July 18, 2005, p. 2.
- <sup>24</sup> *The Korea Herald*, June 20, 2005, p. 1.
- <sup>25</sup> *Donga ilbo*, June 21, 2005, p. A4.
- <sup>26</sup> “Kankoku no baransaa ron towa naninka?” *Sekai shuho*, July 12, 2005, pp. 28-31
- <sup>27</sup> *Yomiuri shimbun*, August 10, 2005, p. 11.
- <sup>28</sup> *Sankei shimbun*, August 13, 2005, p. 7.
- <sup>29</sup> *Tokyo shimbun*, August 1, 2005, pp. 1, 3, 4.
- <sup>30</sup> Takai Kiyoshi, “Hannichi ga fukidashita Chugoku taishu no ‘joho kukan,’” *Sekai shuho*, May 24, 2005, pp. 52-53; *Asahi shimbun*, April 6, 2005, p. 3.



- <sup>31</sup> *Sankei shimbun*, March 5, 2006, p. 2.
- <sup>32</sup> *Mainichi shimbun*, February 16, 2006, p. 6.
- <sup>33</sup> *Sankei shimbun*, August 15, 2005, p. 1.
- <sup>34</sup> *Sankei shimbun*, July 30, 2005, p. 7.
- <sup>35</sup> *Naeil shinmun*, March 3, 2005, p. 23.
- <sup>36</sup> *Naeil shinmun*, June 22, 2005, p. 23.
- <sup>37</sup> *Sankei shimbun*, August 16, 2005, p. 7.
- <sup>38</sup> *Mainichi shimbun*, June 21, 2005, p. 14.
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- <sup>44</sup> Takai Kiyoshi, “‘Hannichi’ ga fukidashita Chugoku taishu no ‘joho kukan,’” *Sekai shuho*, May 24, 2005, pp. 53.
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<sup>47</sup> Byon Chang-gu, *21 segi Dongashia anbo oa Hanguk* (Seoul: Daiwangsha, 2000), pp. 113-25.

<sup>48</sup> *Sankei shimbun*, June 21, 2005, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> *JoongAng Daily*, December 24, 2004, editorial.