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EAI-KF-API Working Paper

Korea-Japan Joint Work on World 2050 ⑫

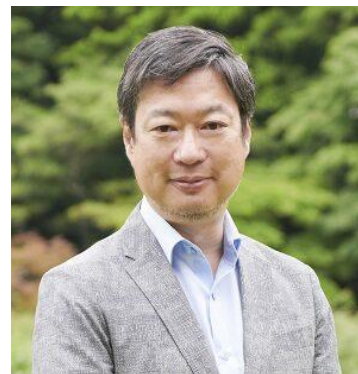
Conclusion

Leading a Regional Order
through Strategic Resilience:
A Bilateral Partnership Ready for the Future

Ken Jimbo (API)

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Leading a Regional Order through Strategic Resilience: A Bilateral Partnership Ready for the Future



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The year 2050 is now just a quarter-century away. However, the coming 25 years will be a transformative period that could fundamentally reshape the foundations of global politics. The dynamics of great power relations will shift, and the rise of emerging economies will become even more pronounced. In this evolving landscape, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan must reconsider the conventional wisdom long adhered to and redefine their strategic approach to an increasingly complex world.

As ROK and Japan look toward 2050, their relationship must adapt to an era of geopolitical uncertainty, economic transformation, and societal change. By adopting pragmatic strategies and leveraging shared strengths, both nations can ensure that the partnership remains resilient and prepared—not only for their national interests, but for regional and global stability. Achieving this will require a multidimensional approach that strengthens security cooperation, fosters economic innovation, advances sustainability efforts, and cultivates leaders of a new generation committed to a forward-looking partnership.

I. Security Cooperation for Regional Stability

The security landscape in Northeast Asia is becoming increasingly complex. As North Korea enhances its nuclear capabilities and deepens its strategic ties with Russia, ensuring long-term stability on the Korean Peninsula, even under high tensions, requires every effort to maintain stability. At the same time, the goal of achieving North Korea's complete denuclearization must be upheld, and every opportunity to advance this objective should be seized.

Despite these shared concerns, security coordination remains limited. The U.S.-ROK alliance prioritizes deterring North Korea, while the U.S.-Japan alliance addresses broader regional threats. However, beyond immediate security challenges, South Korea and Japan must consider how their cooperation can contribute to long-term U.S.-China strategic stability. A more strategic and structured partnership is needed to reinforce regional deterrence while mitigating the risks of escalating tensions.

Though strengthening trilateral security cooperation with the U.S. forms the foundation for this effort, Seoul and Tokyo must also pursue independent strategies to manage their respective relations with China. While maintaining deterrence remains a priority, neither country can afford excessive confrontation with Beijing, given their deep economic interdependence. A balanced approach that enhances deterrence while preserving channels for diplomatic engagement will be essential for managing regional stability.

To strengthen cooperation, Hirohito Ogi proposes a framework of “Foundational Cooperation,” emphasizing logistical coordination, intelligence sharing, and joint defense production without requiring identical security commitments. Practical steps forward include enhanced missile defense collaboration, strengthened cybersecurity measures, and expanded joint exercises. While differences in strategic priorities persist, deeper cooperation is essential for long-term stability. South Korea and Japan must shift from reactive security policies to a proactive, structured defense partnership, to ensure resilience against evolving regional threats.

II. Economic Security and Industrial Competitiveness

South Korea and Japan have been among the first nations to respond to the growing securitization of the global economy, as they jointly recognized the need to balance economic resilience with industrial competitiveness. Economic security has become a central pillar of the bilateral relations of the two countries in response to growing supply chain disruptions and rising geopolitical tensions. Both nations understand the importance of securing critical supply chains—particularly in semiconductors and strategic minerals—while ensuring that economic security policies do not hinder technological innovation. From Japan’s perspective, long-term trade stability and strategic alignment in key sectors such as advanced manufacturing, robotics, and quantum computing are paramount in importance. Meanwhile, Korean experts call for preventing excessive economic fragmentation, resulting from over-securitization.

Despite these shared concerns, differences persist in trade policy and technology standardization. Tokyo has prioritized regional economic frameworks such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). On the other hand, Seoul has taken a more flexible approach, balancing economic diversification with domestic industrial policies. However, both nations have a mutual interest in reducing trade friction and maintaining technological leadership. Establishing a ROK-Japan economic security dialogue could serve as a platform to coordinate industrial policy, enhance supply chain resilience, and promote regulatory alignment in emerging technologies.

III. Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technologies

The rapid evolution of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping economies, security frameworks, and social structures. Both South Korea and Japan are well-positioned to be global leaders in this domain. However, while both nations have developed ambitious AI strategies, different approaches reflect distinct policy priorities. South Korea has focused on ultra-large AI models and infrastructure expansion, aiming for rapid integration across industries. In contrast, Japan has embedded AI within its Society 5.0 vision, underscoring human-centered AI governance and ethical deployment.

Despite these differences, there is strong potential for bilateral alignment in AI governance models to ensure that AI-driven innovations adhere to ethical, safety, and transparency standards. A key area of convergence lies in the development of AI guidelines for data governance, cybersecurity, and algorithmic transparency. Additionally, both countries recognize the necessity of joint AI applications in healthcare, disaster response, and eldercare robotics, particularly as they navigate similar demographic challenges.

However, aligning data-sharing policies and regulatory frameworks remains a challenge. Japan has traditionally favored a cautious, phased regulatory approach, while South Korea has demonstrated a greater willingness to experiment with AI-driven automation in industrial sectors. To bridge these gaps, a ‘ROK-Japan AI and Digital Economy Task Force’ could serve as a platform for policy dialogue, regulatory coordination, and collaborative research on key AI applications. Such cooperation would enhance technological leadership, increasing the contribution to shaping global AI governance.

IV. Energy, Climate, and Sustainability Cooperation

Though achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 is a shared policy objective for both the ROK and Japan, their energy transition strategies differ based on divergent national priorities. Seoul has renewed its focus on nuclear power and hydrogen energy to strengthen energy security. On the other hand, Tokyo has balanced nuclear energy with hydrogen and ammonia-based energy innovations to diversify its decarbonization efforts.

A key area for deeper collaboration is joint hydrogen supply chain development, where both nations can coordinate infrastructure investment, technological standardization, and regulatory frameworks. It would also be promising to cooperate in carbon capture and storage (CCS), renewable energy integration, and green finance, which would enhance regional leadership in clean energy technologies.

Despite such different policy orientations, particularly regarding the pace and scope of nuclear energy expansion, incremental steps toward cooperation could include joint research on nuclear safety, advanced reactor technology, and next-generation energy solutions. By leveraging

their complementary strengths, South Korea and Japan can drive innovation in sustainable energy and establish a cooperative framework for addressing global climate challenges.

V. Cooperation vis-à-vis Common Domestic Challenges

Both South Korea and Japan face rapid population decline, labor shortages, and an aging society, requiring innovative policy solutions to sustain economic growth and social stability. While Japan has prioritized automation and human-machine teaming, South Korea has focused on structural labor reforms and digital adaptation. These strategies are not mutually exclusive; they create opportunities for joint research and policy collaboration in workforce automation, digital healthcare, and labor mobility.

Beyond economic and technological adaptation, societal engagement between the two countries will foster long-term trust and cooperation. Despite historical tensions, both nations recognize the value of expanding cultural exchanges, student mobility programs, and professional training partnerships. Strengthening these people-to-people channels will guarantee that future generations acknowledge ROK-Japan relations not through the lens of past conflicts, but as shared opportunities and a common vision for the future.

VI. Youth as Catalysts that Shape a New Era of Bilateral Relations

Public opinion surveys indicate that younger generations in South Korea and Japan are more open to bilateral engagement than older demographics. Their interactions—whether in cultural industries, technology start-ups, or environmental activism—demonstrate a willingness to collaborate beyond the constraints of historical grievances and shape a more forward-looking relationship.

To sustain this momentum, Seoul and Tokyo should expand youth-led initiatives in technology, sustainability, and entrepreneurship, fostering long-term engagement. A bilateral youth innovation fund could support start-ups focused on climate solutions, digital transformation, and creative industries, while cross-border leadership programs could cultivate the policy and business leaders of the next generation dedicated to deepening bilateral cooperation. By empowering young leaders and institutionalizing these initiatives, South Korea and Japan can lay the foundation for a resilient, future-oriented partnership.

VII. Conclusion: A Shared Vision for 2050

When it comes to the bilateral relationship between the two nations, South Korea and Japan stand at a pivotal juncture. Choices made by the countries today—on security, economic policy, AI cooperation, energy collaboration, and societal adaptation—will not only shape their trajectories but also influence the broader regional and global order. By adopting a strategic and pragmatic approach,

both nations can set exemplary examples as they demonstrate that cooperation remains the most effective path even amid geopolitical fragmentation.

Sustained progress requires institutional mechanisms that deepen security, economic, and technological cooperation while actively engaging with future generations. The ability to align security priorities with economic and technological competitiveness, navigate geopolitical tensions while maintaining diplomatic flexibility, and address domestic challenges with long-term sustainability will determine whether Seoul and Tokyo can emerge as key architects of the regional order in the Indo-Pacific.

To achieve this vision, it is imperative that political, economic, and academic leaders continue sincere and constructive dialogue. The commitment to open and forward-looking discussions across these sectors will be essential in navigating uncertainties and ensuring a stable, cooperative future. As we approach 2050, fostering an enduring framework for engagement is not merely an option—it is a collective responsibility of the two countries.

By embracing resilient and forward-looking cooperation, South Korea and Japan can transform their partnership into a global model, shaping a more stable and prosperous regional order in the decades ahead. ■

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Date of Issue: March 14, 2025
"Leading a Regional Order through Strategic Resilience
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979-11-6617-896-2 95340

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