

The US Influence on the Resilience of ROK–Japan Relations: From the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement to the Camp David Principles*

Suk Eui Sohn(Visiting Researcher, Institute for Japanese Studies,
Seoul National University)

Abstract

This study sheds light on the US influence on the bilateral resilience between Republic of Korea and Japan with particular focus on the ideational clash in the post-2012 period. Specifically, this study utilized the MMR typology—Maintenance, Marginality, and Renewal—for resilience mechanism to analyze the diverging types of US engagement. To maintain the resilience of “social norm,” namely the US–ROK–Japan trilateral “democratic alliance,” the dominant agent engages with mechanism to lower the level of ‘Otherness,’ or the distance of relational identities, between the two junior partners. The context analyses revealed that the US strategies for influence altered not only due to the regional security environment but also the nature as well as the intensity of the bilateral spats. It is not only essential for the three states to internalize the “social norms” upon which the trilateral framework is imagined, but whether such “common value” can overpower the “Otherness” would determine the resilience of the trilateral cooperation in the future.

Keywords: US–ROK–Japan Trilateral Cooperation, ROK–Japan Relations, Identity Politics, Resilience, MMR Typology

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I. Introduction

This paper is an exploratory study aiming at shedding light on the American influence on the resilience of the ROK–Japan relations by focusing on how the dominant agent dealt with the relational distance between two junior partners in the post–2012 period. The ROK–Japan relations grew increasingly complex since the 2010s, due to the re–rise of historical disputes and subsequent suspensions of cooperative mechanisms in security and economic spheres. While the existing studies tend to focus on the security aspect of the trilateral framework, and how national identities and ideational factors play into them, this paper places emphasis particularly on the socially constructed ideational factors in illuminating how the dominant agent of the trilateral framework deals with the fluctuating “Otherness” between the two junior partners. Specifically, we carry out procedural context analyses in order to highlight the US dis/engagement vis–a–vis the ideational conflicts between ROK and Japan.

In the field of security and general management of alliances, the US engagement has contributed to the stabilization of ROK–Japan relations in the post–Cold War setting,¹⁾ while the failure or the insufficiency of US assurance served as a destabilizing factor of the Northeast Asian security environment.²⁾ During the Trump administration, for example, the US disinterests in the ROK–Japan conflicts over historical issues induced escalating tension between the two junior partners.³⁾ While the Abe government, following the US

¹⁾ Easley, Leif-Eric, "Stabilizing Japan-Korea Relations: Restraining Nationalism, Appraising Beijing, Reassuring Washington." *Pacific Review*, vol.36, no.6, 2022, pp.1273~1305.

²⁾ Santoro, David, and John K. Warden, "Assuring Japan and South Korea in the Second Nuclear Age." *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2015, pp.147~165.

³⁾ Noland, Marcus, "Alliances under Stress: South Korea, Japan, and the United States." East-West Center, 2019.

initiative, widened the scope of US–Japan alliance from Asia–Pacific to Indo–Pacific, the focus of South Korean security strategies remained fixed on Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and its denuclearization under the Moon Jae–In leadership.⁴⁾ The discrepancy in threat perceptions between Tokyo and Seoul was a disturbing factor for the US, as it could allow China to take advantage of the decoupling of the trilateral framework.⁵⁾ Sohn demonstrates that the US involvement in the ROK–Japan conflicts effectively led to the converging of strategic interests among the three states in the post–2010s period, centering on the US’s objectives to water down China’s regional influence.⁶⁾

On the other hand, despite the strategic interests in fostering US–ROK–Japan trilateral cooperation, the dominant agent has not always been consistent when it comes to mediating the bilateral conflicts between the two allies. Most notably, the US has been reluctant to intervene when historical disputes arise between its two regional allies and avoided direct involvement. Experts have criticized such disengagement from history–related conflicts as ‘insufficient’ or ‘ineffective,’ claiming that the absence of the US in the ROK–Japan entanglement was detrimental to American interests in the region.⁷⁾ Put simply, while Washington displays strong

4) Park, Cheol Hee, “Expanding Spirals of South Korea–Japan Conflict.” *Strategic Estrangement Between South Korea and Japan as a Barrier to Trilateral Cooperation*, Atlantic Council, 2019, pp. 4–7.

5) Gale, Alastair, “Enmity Deepens between Seoul and Tokyo.” *Wall Street Journal*, February 17, 2015.; Hayashi, Yuka, “Biden’s Mission: Unite Japan, South Korea: U.S. Hopes Crisis over China’s Defense Zone Can Knit Ties among Allies, but Longtime Enmity Proves Hard to Overcome.” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 6, 2013.

6) 손열, “미중 전략경쟁 속의 한일관계, 2012–2023. 역사갈등, 외압, 전략적 동조화.” 『일본연구논총』 제 58호, 2023, pp. 125~147.

7) Cha, Victor, “Finding a Way out from the Japan–Korea Crisis.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 6, 2019.; Bunchan, Patrik Gerard, and Benjamin Rimland. “Only the United States Can Pull Japan and Korea Back from the Brink.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 23, 2019.; Sneider, Daniel. “On the Brink of Economic War between Japan and South Korea, the US Awakens.” *The Oriental Economist*, July 16, 2019.; Kelly, Robert E., and Paul Poast, “The Allies Are Alright: Why America Can

willingness to upgrade trilateral security cooperation, it has avoided direct involvement when it comes to historical or ideational conflicts between ROK and Japan.⁸⁾

Contrary to long-established ‘non-intervention’ principles over ROK–Japan conflicts over history,⁹⁾ recent developments suggest a modification in the US attitudes toward the management of the trilateral framework. The Biden administration has displayed a strong commitment to fostering the US–ROK–Japan trilateral framework as it continues to focus on the strategic competitions against China. In the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, the Biden administration called for “democratic alliances” to work together in the strategic competition with “assertive and authoritarian China.”¹⁰⁾ In the Camp David Principles, defining Japan, ROK, and the US as “Indo–Pacific nations,” the US called for the trilateral cooperation based on international law, shared norms, and common values in realizing the denuclearization of DPRK as well as the stabilization of the Taiwan strait. Sakata points out that the previous absence of the ROK from the Free and Open Indo–Pacific (FOIP) and QUAD frameworks was deemed a “conceptual failure” for the region specialists within the US, as they believed it would send a wrong message to China.¹¹⁾

While the institutionalization of trilateral framework is only at a nascent stage, this study attempts to shed light on the proactive

Get Away with Bullying Its Friends." *Foreign Affairs*, February 22, 2022.

8) 최희식, “미중 전략경쟁 시기의 한일관계: 양극화된 정치와 대일정책.” 『일본연구논총』, 제56호, 2022, pp. 117–146.

9) Sneider, Daniel, and Cheol Hee Park. “Resolved: The United States Can Fix the Japan-South Korea Problem.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 9, 2021.

10) The White House, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance.” March 3, 2021.

11) Sakata, Yasuyo, “Nichibeikan Ha Tatenaoeruka [Can Japan-U.S.-South Korea Relationship Be Rebuilt? Biden's Foreign Policy and Challenges of the "Indo-Pacific" Era].” *Gaiko* [Diplomacy] vol. 67, 2021, pp. 24–29.

and reactive US involvements in its attempt to lower the level of “Otherness” between the junior partners. This study emphasizes that the US has intervened with ideational/historical conflicts between the two junior partners by giving prominence to the ‘common grounds’ for the tripartite.¹²⁾ The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The following section reviews the existing literature on the resilience in interstate relations and how relational identities function in the resilience politics. The third section carries out contextual analyses on how the US attempts (or lack thereof) to lower the levels of Otherness between ROK and Japan affected the resilience of bilateral relations.

II. Resilience and Otherness in Multilateral Relations

The resilience, defined as “the process of patterned adjustments adopted by a society or individual in the face of endogenous or exogenous shocks”,¹³⁾ is discussed as a means to contest a securitization of issues. An issue is securitized in order for the powerholders to legitimize the mobilization of resources to handle the threat.¹⁴⁾ To contest this, resilience strategies take on both proactive and reactive measures in order to reduce the impact of security challenges and also to minimize the disruption to the status quo.¹⁵⁾ Here, resilience is differentiated from equilibrium; once

¹²⁾ Goto, Shihoko, "The Rocky Road to Consolidating Camp David's Gains." *Asia Dispatches*, August 21, 2023.

¹³⁾ Bourbeau, Philippe, "Resilience and International Politics: Premises, Debates, Agenda." *International Studies Review*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2015, pp.374-395.

¹⁴⁾ Buzan, Barry, Ole Weaver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

¹⁵⁾ Fjader, Christian, "The Nation-State, National Security and Resilience in the Age of Globalisation." *Resilience*

disruption occurs, societies make ‘adjustments’ to maintain the core values and foundations of its collectiveness, therefore resilience must be analyzed in its time and context to fully account for different approaches to societal adjustment mechanism.

Bourbeau recognizes different types of resilience mechanism: the MMR typology of resiliencism, namely resilience as Maintenance, Marginality, and Renewal.¹⁶⁾ First, resilience as “maintenance” is characterized by the expanded use of resources to maintain the previously established norm. The dominant discourse constructs “disturbances” as threatening to the social norms which must be dealt with through rigid countermeasures. Second, resilience as marginality is characterized by a response measure that does not challenge the basis of a society, and its strategies fall within the existing boundaries of current policy. At the same time, minimalistic measures are taken in order to deal with shocks and disturbances. Third, resilience as renewal is a response to threats and disturbances in ways that go beyond the existing policy structures. While the renewed policy response is characterized by significant reorganization of policy, it is nonetheless context–dependent; it draws from past experiences and established collective norms.

Such approaches to different types of resilience measures can be applied to analyze the diverse responses of the US to ROK–Japan bilateral conflicts as well as the operation of tripartite arrangement in the Asia–Pacific. From the US’s perspective, the upheavals of the ROK–Japan relations are ‘disturbances’ or ‘shocks’ to its regional security architecture, against which the dominant actor may execute some means of resilience mechanism. Put differently, the collective norms as defined by the US is the

vol. 2, no. 2, 2014, pp.114–129.

¹⁶⁾ Bourbeau, Philippe, "Resiliencism: Premises and Promises in Securitisation Research." *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses* vol.1, no. 1, 2013, pp.3–17.

regional security architecture that consists of two bilateral alliances in which the junior partners engage at least with friendly interactions. The ‘collective identity,’ upon which such social norm stands, is expressed in the oft-used phrase “democratic alliance,” which stands at the other dichotomic end from China’s leadership in growing regional polarization. In other words, the term ‘liberal democracy’ as well as other associated values such as freedom and human rights, serve as the components of relational—as opposed to essentialist—identity of the collective norms. Furthermore, because such relational labeling serves as a function of “Othering” mechanism, it can be weaponized when intra-coalitional discrepancy occurs.

To bring the discussion of “ideational clash” triggered by the historical disputes between ROK and Japan to the center of analysis regarding the dominant agent’s means of resilience strategies, the concept of “Otherness” is useful. Otherness, defined as “a distance... of relational identities,” shapes the resilience of the relationship.¹⁷⁾ The perceived relational identity vis-à-vis the Other consists of many layers, but there exists “dominant ideational issue” that shapes the course of identity politics of the bilateral relations at a nascent stage. This dominant issue is configured within the level of Otherness in the forms of labeling, or how a state describes the Other, as well as the cognitive model of ‘framing’ of policy debates by the political elites. Simply stated, the higher the Otherness—or the more a state identifies the counterpart as ‘different’ or ‘distant’ in its statements and policy debates—the less resilient the bilateral relations is, while low level of Otherness, where the state identifies the other with similar identifications in values, interests, etc., indicates higher

¹⁷⁾ Hirsch, Ben-Josef Michal, and Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "Otherness and Resilience in Bilateral Relations: The Cases of Israel-Germany, India-Russia, and India-Israel." *Journal of International Relations and Development* vol. 24, no. 2, 2021, pp.356-380.

resilience. Such approach allows conflict analyses among states that are not contesting over survival or dominance in a conventional sense. Furthermore, by focusing on relational identities and their functions in the inter–state interactions, it provides answers to the questions as to why, despite material benefits that could derive from friendly relationships, be it economic or security gains, some inter–state relations continue to display low resilience.

Based on these discussions, this study identifies the dominant agent’s measures for implementing the US–ROK–Japan trilateral cooperation through resilience mechanism—maintenance, marginality, and renewal—in the post–2010s period by shedding light on how the US attempted to lower the level of “Otherness” between the two junior partners. This study rests on the premise that, though it may vary in degrees, the US has general interests in maintaining low level of “Otherness” between ROK and Japan. This paper argues that, given this incentive, the dominant agent foster various ‘common grounds’ to restore/maintain the resilience of ROK–Japan relations. Put another way, the resilience of the bilateral relations is measured by the level of “Otherness”—the distance of relational identities or the ‘labeling’ of the other. We hypothesize that, when ‘Otherness’ between ROK and Japan is high (i.e. ROK/Japan labels the other as ideologically distant), the US can either try to lower the ‘Otherness’ by providing ‘common ground’ in both material and ideational proponents, or it can choose not to intervene. As strategies, the former would fall within the categories of resilience as maintenance or renewal, while the latter can be categorized as resilience as marginality—minimizing the mediation efforts.

III. Case Studies: From the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement to Camp David Principles

While the political and social representations of ‘democracy’ and its values have varied overtime, its strategic implications have gained significant prominence in recent decades, especially in the context of othering ‘non-democratic’ rise of China in the post-Cold War regional order. Values such as liberal democracy and liberal market economy have served strategic objectives in US-Japan’s joint efforts in building ‘liberalism-centered’ regional order, within which South Korea was thought to play a strategic role.¹⁸⁾ Put differently, the ‘democracy’ and ‘liberal values’ were the common vocabulary with which the US and Japan’s political elites associated South Korea in its balancing strategy vis-à-vis China. Put differently, Japan’s labeling of South Korea as a ‘democracy,’ as well as ROK’s acknowledgment of Japan as a part of ‘liberal order,’ becomes the focal point in measuring the distance of relational identities between the two states. The following three case studies highlight the development of the US’s resilience mechanism in dealing with the ROK-Japan ideational conflicts, with particular focus on how the ‘common ground’ of the tripartite altered as the focal point of social interactions.

1. Resilience as Maintenance: Japan-ROK Dealignment during Abe-Park period (2012~2015)

With the inaugurations of the Park Geun-Hye government and

¹⁸⁾ Park, Cheol Hee, "Japanese Strategic Thinking toward Korea." In Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo and Joseph P. Ferguson eds., *Japanese Strategic Thought toward Asia*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

the second Abe administration in 2013 and 2012, respectively, the fraying of Korea–Japan bilateral relations grew beyond occasional frictions and became so far as a new pattern of interactions. In an op-ed for *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, then the ROK’s presidential candidate Park Geun-Hye, alluding to Japan as the “wartime transgressor,” asserts that only by upholding the “correct view of history” would Japan be “welcomed as a respectable and leading Asian country.”¹⁹⁾ This expression, “a correct view of history,” continued to appear in the President’s Liberation Day Address in 2014, in which she confronted Japan by claiming that “historical truth cannot be hidden nor denied at one’s whim,” urging Tokyo to provide “a forward-looking measure” for the comfort women victims.²⁰⁾ Yet Tokyo continued to overlook ROK’s increasingly vocal demands for Japan’s initiatives regarding the “comfort women” issue. In the statement commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII in 2015, PM Abe placed emphasis on Japan’s path of recovery from the devastation of war and its efforts to “create a free and democratic country, abiding by the rule of law, and consistently upholding the pledge never to wage a war again.”²¹⁾ And despite external pressure to acknowledge the wartime ‘comfort women’ issue in his Address to Joint Meeting of the U.S. Congress on April 29, 2015, the prime minister avoided making a direct reference to the issue; instead, he resorted to the generalization of female sufferings in the armed conflicts and claimed to build “the kind of world where finally women are free from human rights abuses.”²²⁾ Similar circumvention occurred in his United Nations General Assembly address on September 29, 2015, during which the prime minister bypassed the topic of wartime ‘comfort women’ while sparing half of the speech on the topic of

19) Park, Geun-Hye, "A Plan for Peace in North Asia." *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, November 13, 2012.

20) 대통령기록관, “제69주년 광복절 경축사.” 2014년 8월 15일.

21) Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, "Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe." August 14, 2015.

22) Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, "Toward an Alliance of Hope." April 29, 2015.

female empowerment.²³⁾ In other words, Tokyo defined itself as a ‘democratic peace state’ that had assiduously worked to build a better world for the former victims.

Such high level of Otherness between the junior partners was a worrisome condition for the US policy makers. Observing the prolonged entanglement, US Congress acknowledged that Tokyo must take up on larger responsibility in assuaging South Korean distrust toward former colonizer. In 2015, Congressman Mike Honda, while giving credit for the Japanese government’s past efforts to “face its history,” chides PM Abe’s “revocation” of the Kono statement that could impede a “successful trilateral relationship.”²⁴⁾ Similarly, calling Japan one of the “most reliable partners in the fight for peace,” Congressman Charles Rangel urged the prime minister to acknowledge the comfort women issues in the upcoming address at the US Congress. Congressman Brad Sherman from California, claiming that the US must “get our allies to work together,” condemns Japanese “relitigati[on]” on World War II, which put any multilateral efforts in the Asia–Pacific at risk.

At the same time, some emphasized that the United States must find a way of mediating the diplomatic rapprochement between Tokyo and Seoul to maintain the existing framework of trilateral cooperation. Balbina Hwang, while doubting whether Japan can ever “meet South Korean bar for what is adequate,” claimed that the United States should not be dismissive of the criticality of current ideational conflicts.²⁵⁾ Similarly, acknowledging that the prospects for ROK–Japan reconciliation over historical perspectives

23) Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, “Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Seventieth Session of the United Nations General Assembly.” September 29, 2015.

24) Congress.gov., “In Hopes That Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe Would Uphold International Justice and Address Comfort Women Issues.” *Congressional Record*, vol. 161, no. 62, April 28, 2015.

25) Committee on Foreign Affairs, “U.S. Economic and Military Alliances in Asia.” House of Representatives, July 15, 2015, pp.52–57.

are “beyond US control,” James Schoff claims that “the trilateral cooperation with the U.S. in shared security concerns is an opportunity to create a safe haven for Japan–Korea collaboration.” In other words, they claimed that Washington must play the role, however limited, of maintaining trilateral framework by providing a common ground. Echoing these concerns by the regional experts, the Obama administration focused on maintaining the resilience of trilateral framework by limiting the primary focus of the arrangement on North Korea’s nuclear program as the common threat. President Obama, arranging the first trilateral summit meeting during the Nuclear Security Summit at The Hague on March 25, 2014, limited the scope of trilateral cooperation on North Korea, while only resorting to behind–closed–doors mediation on the ‘comfort women issues’ that led to the joint agreement announced in December 2015.²⁶⁾

What was significant was that, throughout this process of bringing ROK and Japan to the negotiation table, the Obama administration did not appeal to the “common values” such as freedom or liberal democracy.²⁷⁾ Instead, it was North Korea’s nuclear threat that brought the junior partners together via American mediation. This lack of “common values” may partially explain the short–lived effects of lowered level of “Otherness,” for the agreement itself did not induce any significant alteration to the relational identities especially for ROK. On the contrary, by validating the “finality and irreversibility” of the settlement, it exonerated Japan’s self–image as a former colonizer while failing to provide alternative ground upon which South Korea’s self–image would stand in its relations with Japan.

²⁶⁾ Kim, Sung Chull, *Partnership within Hierarchy: The Evolving East Asian Security Triangle*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017, pp. 161~164

²⁷⁾ Sneider, Daniel, "Behind the Comfort Women Agreement." *The Oriental Economist*, January 10, 2016.

2. Resilience despite Marginalization: The Trump Administration and the US Oversight

Under the leadership of PM Abe, Japan turned increasingly determined in marginalizing ROK's relational status. The growing frustration vis-à-vis the neighboring state has driven Japan to redefine South Korea as peripheral to the regional security structure—centering on US–Japan security alliance—and more as a collaborator to China–led regional order. Such attempt for ‘redefining Korea’ as a part of ‘illiberal’ bloc first came to surface in the 2015 Diplomatic Bluebook, which deleted the 2014 expression of South Korea as the neighboring state who “shares fundamental values such as freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights.” South Korea’s apparent acceptance of China–led regional order, backed by its heavier economic reliance on the world’s second largest economy, bred speculation regarding ROK’s strategic interests that prioritize China over Japan.²⁸⁾ More symbolically, the continuous failure to have South Korea accept Japan’s efforts to settle the historical issues frustrated Japanese counterpart, seemingly breeding not only ‘apology fatigue’ but also adverse reaction.²⁹⁾

The already distant relational identities became further apart following the consecutive South Korea’s 2018 Supreme Court rulings that ordered Japanese firms to pay reparations to former

²⁸⁾ Sakaki, Alexandra, and Nishino Junya, "Japan's South Korea Predicament." *International Affairs* vol. 94, no. 4, 2018, pp.735-754.; Dian, Matteo, "Japan, South Korea and the Rise of a Networked Security Architecture in East Asia." *International Politics* vol. 57, no. 2, 2020, pp. 185-207.

²⁹⁾ Berger, Thomas, "Rekishī Mondai: Fukanzēn Na Jiyūshugi [Historical Problems: Imperfect Liberalism]." In Funabashi Yoichi and John G. Ikenberry eds., *Jiyū Shuginō Kiki: Kokusai Chitsujō to Nihon [the Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: Japan and the World Order]*, Tokyo: Tokyo Keizai Shinpōsha, 2020, pp.242-271

conscripted labors of Imperial Japan. Running for presidency, Moon Jae-in vocally criticized the 2015 agreement as “seriously flawed,” a comment that enraged the Japanese counterpart.³⁰⁾ Tokyo criticized that the rulings violate the principle of state immunity in international law, claiming that the rulings were against “international laws and agreements.” Upholding the ‘final and irreversible’ 2015 settlement, Japan insisted that the Korean government must “remedy the status of its breaches of international law on its own responsibility as a country.”³¹⁾ PM Abe decried ROK for “unilaterally violating the settlement agreement, and by so doing breaking the international agreements that were the foundation for the 1965 Basic Agreement.”

Japan’s ‘de-liberalization’ of ROK even accelerated in 2019, as the Abe cabinet passed a cabinet decision on the revision of licensing policies on three commodities related to semiconductor products. So-called “whitelist dispute,” Japan claimed that these items were making ways into North Korea, and the ejection of South Korea from the list was purely out of security concerns. President Moon, outraged by Tokyo’s “retaliation measure” against South Korea’s core industry, swiftly declared the withdrawal from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).

The chain of these developments between ROK and Japan in the second half of the 2010s was unprecedented in that the ideational clash became materialized in the bilateral conversations concerning security. Not only did Japan declare that South Korea did not share the fundamental liberal values as well as compliance to international agreements,³²⁾ South Korea labeled Japan as an adversary who intentionally seeks to undermine ROK’s national

³⁰⁾ Song, Jung-a, and Robin Harding, "South Korea's Moon Jae-in Throws Japan Detente into Doubt." *FT.com*, December 28, 2017.

³¹⁾ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, "Japan's Efforts on the Issue of Comfort Women." 2018.

³²⁾ Suzuki, Shogo, "Japanese Revisionists and the 'Korea Threat': Insights from Ontological Security." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* vol. 32, no. 3, 2019, pp. 303-321.

interests. In other words, the disagreements were centered around the national security concerns as well as state interests.

This time, the disturbance to the regional architecture as US saw it was triggered by Seoul's intention to terminate the security agreement arranged by the dominant agent itself. Contrary to the series of US pressure vis-à-vis Japan prior to the reaching of 2015 'comfort women agreement,' it was Seoul that was the 'loose cannon' against the US's security architecture designed to deter regional risks. The US State Department claimed that it was "disappointed" at the Moon administration's decision; Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Randall Schriver warned that "The United States has repeatedly made clear to the Moon administration that this decision would have a negative effect ... on U.S. security interests."³³⁾ Further, the US Senate passed a resolution expressing concerns for the consequence of the termination of GSOMIA, and "the resulting strain on trilateral cooperation and on our bilateral alliances." Particularly, with China in mind, it stressed how the cooperation between the two junior partners is critical in assuring maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific.³⁴⁾ From the US perspective, Seoul's misconception of GSOMIA arrangement as 'bilateral agreement' with Japan was problematic, as it serves the long-standing interests of the US in building a comprehensive security cooperation mechanism in the region. At the same time, as the dramatic events unfolded in the US-North Korea rapprochement between 2018-2019, the US leadership seemed to lose interests in the bilateral conflicts between South Korea and Japan, marginalizing the criticality of the trilateral

³³⁾ Center for Strategic and International Studies, "The Importance of U.S.-Japan-Korea Trilateral Defense Cooperation." August 28, 2019.

³⁴⁾ Congress.gov., "Reaffirming the Importance of the General Security of Military Information Agreement between the Republic of Korea and Japan, and for Other Purposes." Senate Resolution 435, 116th Congress, November 21, 2019.

security arrangement.³⁵⁾

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to uncover the complexity of the US's external policies during the Trump administration and how it altered the strategic thinking of regional states, it is possible to interpret the US disinterests in the regional allies and the simultaneous ROK–Japan antagonism as a consequence of the digression from the social norms. At the same time, Trump's personal disinterests does not mean that the US policymakers also overlooked the critical importance of the regional triangle. The Congress reminded itself the criticality of US–Japan alliance as ‘the cornerstone of peace and stability in the Indo–Pacific region,’ and the US–ROK alliance as the ‘deterrence mechanism’ against the North Korean regime. The US expressed interests in stabilizing ROK–Japan relations and “encourage the advancement of shared priorities” to face regional security challenges.³⁶⁾ Put simply, the trilateral framework proved a level of resilience despite US oversight by minimizing the ‘common ground’ to the original arrangement of the trilateral framework.

3. Resilience as Renewal: The Yoon–Kishida Rapprochement and the Camp David Principle

The landscape of US–ROK–Japan triangle transformed dramatically as Yoon Suk–yeol took office in May 2022 as the president of the ROK. Taking a drastic turn away from Moon administration's “look–North” policies, President Yoon did not hesitate to express his willingness to reinstitute trilateral security cooperation “to counter increasing North Korean nuclear threats” from

³⁵⁾ Bunchan, Patrik Gerard, and Benjamin Rimland, “Only the United States Can Pull Japan and Korea Back from the Brink.” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 23, 2019.

³⁶⁾ Congress.gov., “National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Indo-Pacific.” Committed on Armed Services, House of Representatives, March 10, 2021, pp.73–74.

the early point on.³⁷⁾ Prime Minister Kishida, upon the election of Yoon to the presidency, reassured the importance of Japan–ROK–US trilateral framework, stating that the “sound Japan–ROK relations are indispensable in realizing rules–based international order.”³⁸⁾ The US was also quick to take advantage of the inauguration of the conservative government in Korea, arranging the first trilateral foreign ministers’ meeting on July, 2022. In the joint statement published in September, the three foreign ministers reaffirmed the joint commitment not only in the deterrence against DPRK provocations, but also in their support for Pacific Island countries, ASEAN centrality, and the strengthening of rule–based economic order in the Indo–Pacific region.³⁹⁾ Furthermore, the inclusion of ROK into the FOIP framework was solidified at the trilateral summit meeting held in Phnom Penh on November 13, 2022.⁴⁰⁾

There was an astounding level of parallel in ROK and Japan’s visions for ‘Indo–Pacific’ framework. As Japan defined the principles of FOIP to “defend freedom and the rule of law,” and “respect diversity, inclusiveness, and openness,” South Korea also established “inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity” as the principles in achieving a “free, peaceful, and prosperous” Indo–Pacific.⁴¹⁾ Calling Japan the “closest neighbor,” the ROK expressed its commitment to the shared values of “freedom, rule of law, and human rights.” Similarly, Japan added ROK for the first time as a cooperating partner in its effort to establish the region that values freedom and

37) "Full Text of Yoon's Address at Us Congress." *The Korea Times*, April 28, 2023. https://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2023/04/120_349964.html

38) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, "Telephone Talk between Prime Minister Kishida and President-Elect of the Republic of Korea Yoon Suk Yeol." March 11, 2022.

39) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Foreign Ministerial Meeting." September 22, 2022.

40) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, "Phnom Penh Statement on Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific." November 13, 2022.

41) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region." December 28, 2022.

rule of law.⁴²⁾ The last piece to complete the bilateral détente was put in place by the ROK initiative, who announced the third-party solution for the compensation of the former forced labors, symbolizing the curtailing gap in the two states' relational identities.

Building upon the diminishing Otherness between the two junior partners, the United States took a drastic measure to bring the trilateral resilience to a next level. At Camp David, the three leaders met under the US initiative in August 2023, in a first attempt for the institutionalization of the trilateral security cooperation and beyond. In the field of security, promises of cooperation were made not only for existing programs but also for cybersecurity, information sharing, and countering of foreign information manipulation in the broader Indo–Pacific region. The three states also agreed to develop a financial institution to secure supply chains in the Indo–Pacific; cooperation in women's empowerment, technology protection, and promotion of global health were also promised in the joint statement.

Victor Cha appraised the renewed trilateral commitment designed and promoted by the United States in the Camp David Principles as equivalent to America's initiative in the finalization of 1965 Normalization Treaty between ROK and Japan.⁴³⁾ The significance of the most recent agreement lies in the function of ideational values. The new Principle designated the values such as freedom and democracy as collective norms with which the tripartite stand against China's growing influence in the region. The question, however, is not necessarily how such "common values" are effective in marginalizing China's presence and attract more regional allies; rather, what will determine the success of trilateral cooperation is to

⁴²⁾ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, "New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)." November 28, 2023.

⁴³⁾ Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Reviewing the Camp David Trilateral Summit." August 29, 2023.

what extent the dominant agent will be able to annihilate the temptations for “Othering” between the two junior partners.

IV. Conclusion and Implications

This study attempted to shed light on the US influence on the bilateral resilience between ROK and Japan, especially in the post-2012 period during which the two US allies grew increasingly dissociated from one another over ideational and historical entanglements. Despite often-noted absence or ‘hesitation’ of the dominant agent of the triangle when it comes to ROK-Japan’s ideational conflicts over history, the United States continued to push for the two allies’ ‘reconciliation’ through various means. Specifically, this study utilized the MMR typology for resilience mechanism to analyze the diverging types of intervention. To maintain the resilience of ‘social norm,’ namely the US-ROK-Japan trilateral “democratic alliance,” the dominant agent engages with mechanism to lower the level of ‘Otherness,’ or the distance of relational identities.

While the US can play a key role in the rapprochement of ROK and Japan, the analyses above nonetheless indicate the limited capacity of the dominant agent in inducing fundamental shifts in the two states’ perceptions of one another. It is limited, first and foremost, because the dominant ideational issues that determined the disposition of the bilateral relations lies with the fundamentally diverging understandings of the nature of colonial rule, which were sedimented long before the idea of ‘trilateral cooperation’ came to surface. It also implies that the nature of ‘Otherness’ between the two US allies is likely to remain hostile, and therefore must be

under careful control. Second, the capacity of the dominant agent in forging ‘reconciliation’ is limited because, at least in current context, the proposed “common values” such as freedom, liberal democracy, rule of law, etc. are relationally defined in the context of countering China–led regional order. Put differently, it is not only essential for the three states to internalize the “social norms” upon which the trilateral framework is imagined, but whether such “common value” can overpower the “Otherness” would determine the resilience of the trilateral cooperation.

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논문요약

한일관계의 회복탄력성과 미국의 관여에 관한 고찰

손석의(서울대학교 일본연구소 객원연구원)

본 연구는 2012년 이후 한일관계의 부침을 중심으로 미국이 양국 관계의 회복탄력성(resilience)에 미치는 영향을 조명하는 것을 목적으로 한다. 구체적으로 회복탄력성 메커니즘에 관한 MMR 유형론을 기반으로 '유지(maintenance)', '소외(marginality)', '갱신(renewal)'의 세 가지 관여 형태를 살펴보았다. 미국은 한미일 관계의 '사회적 규범', 즉 '민주주의동맹'의 회복탄력성을 유지하기 위해 한일 간의 '타자성(Otherness)', 즉 상대적 정체성의 수렴을 촉진하는 메커니즘을 이행하였다. 사례분석을 통해 미국에 의한 한일관계 개입 여부 및 방식은 지역 안보 환경뿐만 아니라 한일 간 갈등의 성격과 수준에 따라 변화하는 양상을 확인할 수 있다. 한미일의 공통적 가치로서의 '사회적 규범'이 '타자성'을 극복할 수 있을지가 향후 3국 협력의 지속성을 결정할 것으로 예상된다.

주제어: 한미일 협력, 한일관계, 국가정체성, 회복탄력성, MMR유형론

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