

# Strategic Triangles Reshaping International Relations in East Asia

Gilbert Rozman



# STRATEGIC TRIANGLES RESHAPING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN EAST ASIA

Rozman shows how East Asia's international relations over three decades can be best understood through the lens of triangles, analyzing relations between the key nations through a series of trilateral relationships.

He argues that triangles present a convincing answer to the question of whether we had entered a new era of bipolarity like the Cold War or an age of multipolarity. Triangulation emerged as a dynamic in East Asia in the aftermath of the Cold War and was accelerated in the course of the Xi and Trump administrations. Even as Sino-US competition and confrontation deepened, triangles had a substantial presence. East Asian triangles share an unusual mixture of three distinct elements: deep-seated security distrust, extraordinary economic interdependence, and a combustible composition of historical resentments and civilizational confidence. The combination of the three makes the case for triangularity more compelling, Rozman argues. The legacy of communism, the pursuit of reunification on the Korean Peninsula, and moves to expand beyond the US-Japan alliance have all driven the way triangles have evolved. Only as bipolarity intensified in the 2020s was triangularity losing ground. The degree of turnabout is analyzed for all of the cases considered.

Rozman evaluates each key triangle of states in turn and assesses how the relationship impacts the region more widely.

This book provides an essential framework for understanding the current state and trajectory of East Asian international relations, for students and policymakers.

**Gilbert Rozman** is the Emeritus Musgrave Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, USA—where he taught for 43 years. He is the editor-in-chief of *The Asan Forum*, a bi-monthly online journal on international relations in the Indo-Pacific region. His research over the years has concentrated on countries in Northeast Asia, including China, Japan, Korea, Russia, and the United States, and their relations to each other. He has relied heavily on primary sources from these countries. Among other frameworks, he has explored how national identities shape bilateral relations, developing an interdisciplinary social science approach outside the mainstream.

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*Gilbert Rozman*



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**Gilbert Rozman**

March 2022

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### How Triangularity Changed the New Face of East Asia

This book views East Asia through the lens of triangles. While emerging in stages from the end of the Cold War, the forces of triangularity accelerated with the advent of both Chairman Xi Jinping, who keeps pressing countries to accept a Sinocentric region, and President Donald Trump, who was demanding that they bow to US leadership in order to block China's strategy. In place of Trump, President Joe Biden accepted multilateralism, recognizing a role for triangles while doubling down on forging a strategy to counter China's aggression. The result was rising bipolarity, intensified by the Ukraine war. In the early 2020s, triangularity in East Asia was finally losing ground after 30 years.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine both reflected the era of triangularity and altered its course. Assuming that China had its back and would endorse this rollback of the US-led world order, President Vladimir Putin boldly unleashed his invading forces. Welcomed in Asia by North Korea, he assumed the revival of the Cold War anti-American triangle. Yet, at the pivot of this triangle and that with China and the United States is China, which faces limits on how much it will allow Russia to set the course of international reordering. Also, it watched anxiously as Japan and South Korea, two recent drivers of triangular dynamics, were being swept into the US orbit against Russia with implications for China in their policies. On the one hand, Russia was bringing triangularity to the forefront. On the other, it was having the effect of undercutting triangularity in Asia at odds with China's aims. Only by grasping the forces of triangularity will we clearly appreciate the impact of this transformative event in 2022 for the rapidly evolving regional environment in East Asia.

Unlike the Cold War era, when bilateralism prevailed (apart from the shift of China leading to triangular thinking), at least three conditions paved the way to widespread triangularity. One, economic interdependencies make it much more difficult for countries to stand squarely on one side or the other. Two, ideological rigidity

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has been replaced by more porous national identity gaps between pairs of countries. Three, the three-decade interregnum of rising hopes by other states of being able to play a balancing or even a mediating role in Sino-US relations continued to leave a strong imprint across East Asia.

The case for triangularity in East Asia rests on three conditions different from the bipolar Cold War: economic interdependencies with rival powers, national identity gaps between countries beyond a sharp ideological divide, and countries conditioned to expect a larger role than subordination in one camp or another. To the 2020s, paradoxically, intensified Sino-US bipolarity had proven to be fertile soil for rising triangularity, but that may end.

Amidst a debate on whether a new Cold War means a return to the bipolarity of the old Cold War or have we entered into an age of multipolarity, triangles have not received the attention they are due. By drawing attention to them, I acknowledge the predominance of the Sino-US confrontation, while accepting the voices of other parties, mostly reacting to Sino-US relations but also maneuvering under the US or Chinese umbrella to reshape the regional framework. Focus on triangles allows us to thread the needle between claims of all-consuming bipolarity and overblown license for third parties to pursue their own path of multilateralism. This leaves states just two options to maneuver: in a triangle with the United States and China or in a triangle with either the United States or China and a third country aware of the presence of the rival great power. Even states that had made their choice between the two rivals operated in one or more triangular contexts, maneuvering in ties to allies, as well as to adversaries. Such maneuvering grew more difficult in the atmosphere of 2022.

In light of the aforementioned, a new metaphor—the triangle—is needed to analyze geopolitics in East Asia. The dichotomy between multipolarity and bipolarity fails to capture regional dynamics. Talk of a hub and spokes is justifiably falling out of favor. Even the popular concept of a balance of power, famously applied to nineteenth-century Europe, implying either a collectivity of many strong nations or, later, countries lining up to take sides in a polarized environment, fails to explain well the current conditions of states seeking space for leverage between two dominant powers or for repositioning under one or the other power. Many East Asian states—some deemed great powers, others middle powers, and one a nuclear-armed rogue power—have the wherewithal to gain traction against China and the United States or to proceed somewhat on their own even if allied with one power. The need to look strategically in two directions at one time—sometimes varying one of the actors of concern—makes geopolitics a different game than what it has been. It puts a premium on taking security, economics, and national identities all into direct account.

This book is divided into three parts, exploring different forces critical to triangular development. Part I considers the legacy of socialism and China's behavior in three contexts, each having significance for recreating the essence of that legacy. Part II postulates South Korea's role as a swing country, debating whether to balance China and the United States, to promote a triangle with China and Japan, or to solidify the US alliance system with Japan. Finally, Part III examines Japan's place

in forging triangularity with the United States but also demonstrating a degree of autonomy. As an exception, it has pursued the Quad with Australia and India along with the United States. The United States figures in seven of the nine triangles/Quad considered, but this book avoids popular US-centric assumptions about how it is driving international relations, pointing to how others are taking the lead.

Chapters 1 and 11 explain the framework for international relations introduced here, arguing for the theoretical utility of strategic triangularity and the recent revival of bipolarity. Chapters 2–10 present analyses of the nine cases chosen here, seeking depth to make them worthy as studies. Finally, throughout this book can be found explanations of the driving forces in the evolution of East Asia, many different from those typically presented. In theory, case studies, and explanatory variables for change, the reader will find distinctive material for rethinking the post-Cold War decades in East Asia while being introduced to indicators for how these forces may be poised to shape forthcoming developments in the region.

### **Chronology of Post-Cold War Triangular Relations in East Asia**

In retrospect, triangular relations among East Asian countries were inevitable after “new thinking” led Mikhail Gorbachev to end the Cold War and, at the same time, retreat from Asia, Deng Xiaoping flaunted clear international norms on June 4, 1989, and set China on a course leading to challenging the United States in Asia, and US “triumphalism” under a series of presidents reasserted the US role as the dominant power in East Asia. Beijing needed time before it could pose a serious challenge to US dominance. Washington lost its focus on the region by becoming bogged down in Southwest Asia from Afghanistan to Iraq. Other countries sought to fill the gaps left by these two giants, leading to images of regionalism and larger groupings than trilateralism. Yet, China’s inexorable rise and the strong reassertion of US regional power pressed other states to respond not just to one but to both, building momentum toward a series of triangular relations as the key framework beyond the Sino-US bilateral relationship. Not all of the most critical triangles involved the two giants in the region, but their presence left a strong imprint on each of the triads.

The United States’ hub-and-spokes image from the Cold War era when the two superpowers largely kept to their own camps has faded as countries maneuver between the United States and China. The aspirations for a Sinocentric order reviving China’s status as the “central kingdom” defy the reality of an enduring, powerful US presence widely welcomed in the region. Talk of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-centrism or an expanded Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) bloc jointly led by China and Russia obscures the primary dynamics of triangularity. When countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Russia look for leverage in their regional dealings, they operate largely within triangular frameworks, each involving both China and the United States or at least one of the two. The realization that triangles, as well as the Quad (the United States, Japan, Australia, India to be discussed as an exception in Chapter 10), played a substantial part in the reshaping of East Asia has spurred separate analyses in the nine chapters to follow.

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Chinese leaders were biding their time under the dictum left by Deng Xiaoping, but they rejected alternatives to displacing the United States and reviving a Sinocentric order in East Asia. Japan appealed in 1991–95, again in 2001–03, and finally in 2009–10 for less China-centric regionalism through an East Asian Community, but it was thwarted by the dubious response of China and strong reminders of how much it needs the United States.

ASEAN offered a neutral partner, taking the lead in region-building endeavors, but China balked at a breakthrough on code of conduct talks, blocked any consensus on confidence building over the South China Sea, and despite acquiescing to the broader ASEAN + 6 and the East Asian Summit made sure to limit them to “talk shops.” The Six-Party Talks gave Beijing centrality on North Korean diplomacy before it squandered that by turning a blind eye to the North’s breakaway to full-scale nuclearization and outright aggression in 2009–10. Impatience with multilateralism not dominated by itself, China set East Asia on a course leading to triangularity, as it used its growing economic clout to pressure states.

US leaders vacillated on multilateralism, as Democrats were generally more supportive and Republicans more tempted by alternatives. As the hub-and-spokes approach proved inadequate, President Bill Clinton searched for complementary mechanisms, while critics blamed his weakness rather than acknowledging new realities in Asia. The succeeding Bush administration started by trying to set the clock back in East Asia policy, reaffirming unipolarity and doubling down on the US–Japan alliance, only after 9/11 diverting its energies elsewhere. The Six-Party Talks were a stopgap measure, less multilateralism than a way to get China to tackle the North Korean issue, keep Japan involved, and try to limit the damage of a widening Japan–Republic of Korea (ROK) divide. By the late Bush years, the approach was changing to accepting triangularity in Sino–Taiwan–US relations, Sino–ASEAN–US relations, and even Sino–India–US relations. President Barack Obama went further on multilateralism with the leadership of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) economic initiative, cooperation to get China to agree to more sanctions on North Korea at the United Nations (UN) Security Council, and quiet diplomacy to calm Japan–ROK tensions as both explored ties to a great power out of step with US diplomacy. Trump doubled down on unilateralism to little objection from other Republicans, but he could not stem the tide of triangularity. Indeed, by vitiating various alternatives to it and pressing harder on China, he accelerated its advancement. In the subsequent Biden era, US Indo-Pacific strategy became the overwhelming focus as allies and partners were beseeched, one by one, to respond to China in a triangular framework. As the Sino–US divide grew wider, the forces of bipolarity finally gained momentum, notably in 2022, when states could not easily stay on the sidelines in a war scenario.

Regional multilateralism proved to be an unrealizable goal, only temporarily echoed in China for expedient reasons and inconsistently supported by the US as long as it was not excluded. A Sino–US condominium was beyond reach, given the sharp disparity in aims and the wariness of other countries. Rising Sino–US tensions fueled greater triangularity for an extended period until a Cold War atmosphere boosted a resurgence of bipolarity.

During the three decades from 1988 to 2019, East Asian players were emboldened to seek triangular leverage. Japan started the process at the end of the 1980s, anticipating the ties it could advance separate from its US alliance and, as Sino-US ties deteriorated, spotting an opening in what was viewed as the most significant triangle. South Korea was not far behind, talking of diplomatic diversification and with the Sunshine Policy pressing for a central role in the Sino-ROK-US triangle in dealing with North Korea instead of being left with a subordinate place in the ROK-US-Japan triangle. Russia did not take long to get into the act, assuming that its expanding ties with China would give it real clout in a revived Sino-Russian-US strategic triangle, where it could play the role of the pivot. If multipolarity for many represented something broader than triangles, these three states were thinking increasingly in triangular terms—albeit recalibrating their views of what a triangle could be as China’s rise intensified and US policy was being adjusted. Of course, their own frustrations and domestic shifts were important too in triangular aspirations. Of the three, Russia was most obsessive in driving for change.

Triangular dynamics were intensifying from the 1990s, as Japan and South Korea at last gained confidence that they could exert leverage at some distance from their continued alliance with the United States and China turned to “neighboring countries” after its ties to the United States had frayed. With the Soviet Union gone, there was a vacuum, as in the case of North Korea and India, that could encourage triangularity, although some time would be needed. In the 2000s, triangularity picked up steam, reflecting a more balanced Sino-US rivalry, more active South Korean diplomacy, and Russia asserting itself. The decade from 2008 to 2019 warrants showcasing as the heyday of full triangularity with Sino-US relations at the center. China grew more aggressive, the United States pushed back, and the other major players in East Asia jockeyed with these two states in mind. Xi reenergized China, while Barack Obama upped US intensity and Trump raised alarm.

Accelerated advance of triangularity awaited the unleashing of Trump in his second year in office, as well as the full unfolding of Xi’s less fettered agenda with the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China at the end of 2017. On the front lines were Russia, drawing closer to China; North Korea, switching to the diplomatic track; South Korea, seizing the initiative under Moon Jae-in; Japan, finally enabled to reengage in summitry with China while clinging closely to the United States; and India, active in ways not seen before in competition with China. Trump and Xi abandoned the multilateralism of TPP or a “harmonious world” in favor of naked bilateralism where they were able to throw their country’s weight around. That is what was clearly meant by “America First” and the “China Dream.” Newly pressured from both sides, countries now were obliged to think more directly about triangular dynamics, even if it was reassuring to overstate one’s potential clout as a unique driving force engaged with other states as well. Yet potential for bipolarity was rising too, which was brought to the fore in the Ukraine war of 2022. In the background, the response to Russia was seen as sending a message to China too.

The Biden administration championed both a grand strategy rooted in bilateralism versus China as well as the Quad (building on the US-Japan-Australia-India

March 2021 virtual summit with efforts to draw others into an even broader form of multilateralism). On the surface, triangles were missing, but in actual practice, they were the building blocks for a coalition of democracies and a security cordon versus Chinese expansionism. A US grand strategy was gradually being rolled out, pursued one triangle at a time, whenever possible. On the other side, Sino-Russian relations drew closer, incorporating triangles in Central Asia but, most importantly, consciously coordinating in the face of a triangle with the United States and recognizing the strategic utility of coordination to draw North Korea into a triangle. Such maneuvering was complicated by renewed bipolarity in the 2020s.

### East Asian Triangles

East Asians are conscious of their region's past as the history of three kingdoms: China, fountainhead of tradition and dominant in influence; Korea, transmitter of tradition and testing grounds for ambitions at critical times; and Japan, leader in modernization but marred by a record of militarization. Under the spell of a long-popular Chinese novel, *History of the Three Kingdoms*, readers throughout the region regard triangular relations strategically as a challenge demanding diplomatic cunning, alliance building, military preparedness, and long-range tactics. After the Cold War, in stages, China and Japan had resumed their regional competition with the added twist that the United States and Russia, which had carved Korea in two, remain intent on playing a key role in shaping its destiny. This is a formidable environment for strategic thinking, situating Korea at the "hub."

The East Asian core triangle of China, Japan, and Korea has changed significantly over history and again over the post-Cold War decades, but it retains a central regional role.

Observers have also been accustomed to identifying other triangles important to regional affairs. The Great Strategic Triangle, as Lowell Dittmer dubs it, comprised China, the Soviet Union, and the United States, and it is once again drawing attention with Russia's revival. The Socialist Legacy Triangle of China, the Soviet Union, and North Korea may have seemed moribund after the end of the Cold War, but with enforcement of sanctions at stake as well as far-reaching diplomacy, its legacy survives with Russia. Increasingly, the focus over North Korea has turned less to the peninsula-centric triangles of the two Koreas and either China or the United States but to the Shadow of the Cold War Triangle of China, North Korea, and the United States. Together, these triangles serve as a clear reminder of the legacy of the Cold War, which shapes the quest for a new regional order. Russia came to welcome these divisive legacies, pressing China to give its full backing, which it seemed to do.

Another set of triangular international relations recognizes the role of South Korea as the fulcrum of change. It is on the front lines, searching for a major role in the transformation of triangles it cannot easily shape. Here, the South Korea-China-United States Triangle is seen as the Pivot of Regional Transformation, centering on tugging South Korea in one direction or the other. Privileged with what is supposed to be an annual summit, Sino-South Korea-Japan relations represent the

Traditional East Asian Core Triangle. Likewise, the South has a determinative role in the East Asian Alliance Triangle of the United States–South Korea–Japan. All three of these triangles contribute to an essential framework for grasping how the regional order has been taking shape in Northeast Asia since 1990. In 2022, the Ukraine war introduced one more factor complicating South Korea’s efforts to bridge divides in Asia as Biden pressed for a strong, unified response. A new, conservative president in Seoul shifted policy more fully into the US camp.

Finally, we can conceptualize a third set of triangles/Quad as tests for Japan–US relations in managing ties to other Asian powers. The most conspicuous Japan–US Great Power Triangle is with China. Next, we turn to Russia for another great power triangle. Last in our coverage is India and Australia in their ties to Japan and the United States. These three groups focus respectively on the northern tier, the central axis, and the southern tier of the Indo-Pacific region, pointing to Japan’s multidirectional role in Asian relations.

Three driving forces are depicted in this triangular sweep across the region: the Cold War legacy, the importance of South Korea as the oft-aspiring swing player, and the capacity of the US–Japan alliance to shape great power relations. The first set of triangles tests the revival of an order forged in the 1950s left in fragile shape by the Sino–Soviet split and North Korea’s pariah status in the 1990s–2000s but never fully displaced. Ties between each of the former communist bloc states and the United States are critical to how this force will fare. The second set of triangles tests South Korea’s vulnerability as it aspires to some sort of centrality in reshaping both the peninsula and the Northeast Asia region. The response of China will, arguably, be most decisive, influencing all three of the triangles in which Seoul operates. The third group of triangles reflects the wide scope of the region’s most powerful alliance. Japan has sought to embrace Australia and India to smooth a Quad with the United States, to push its ally away from China in a triangle, and to find a way to narrow the Russo–US divide to transform a third triangle. The North Koreans, South Koreans, and Japanese are all struggling to steer the driving forces present in the region, but they face the formidable obstinacy of China, the United States, and Russia to take control of those forces with little leeway for lesser powers or India to set the agenda. The year 2022 looms as a watershed in which Russia invoked the Cold War legacy, South Korea lost room to maneuver, and the US–Japan alliance was the core of resistance in Asia.

East Asian triangles through the 2010s exhibited an unusual mixture of three distinctive elements: deep-seated security distrust, extraordinary economic interdependence, and a combustible composition of historical resentments and civilizational confidence. Any one of these forces might support triangularity of relationships, but a combination of the three makes the case for triangularity more compelling. Five of the seven states present in the regional triangles we cover have nuclear weapons and, unlike most nuclear states, apart from Pakistan, are not enmeshed in alliances that limit how they might be wielded. Six of the seven are among the top-12 states in gross domestic product (GDP), and most of them have other states in this grouping as their leading trading partners at a time of extensive production networks that bind them together. Finally, four are heirs to Confucian traditions, impacting

national identities through prioritization on history and on a particular outlook on one's identity as crucial to legitimacy, while three of them are rooted in communist legacies, also exerting a powerful impact on national identities that widens gaps with most others. How this mix of unusual features operates in various triangles is covered in the following chapters, after first considering general themes in the analysis of triangularity in international relations.

## Analysis of Triangularity

Triangularity here means maneuvering among three countries that impact the bilateral pairings one by one. Sometimes, the direction is toward a threesome working closely together, as in a three-way alliance. At other times, it is one country seeking to gain the pivot, extracting concessions from the other two. Still other triangles reveal two ganging up against the third to apply more pressure than one could alone. Examples of all three of these types appear on the following pages, but rising bipolarity is changing the mix. Hope to play the role of the pivot is fading, adversarial two versus one is rising. Whether Beijing or Washington can consolidate three-way alliances and expand them is a critical question.

The following breakdown of triangular dynamics departs from a strict balance of power approach to cover three variables: (1) *strategic threat*, associated with a balance of power but not encompassed by it; (2) *economic vulnerability*, associated with the degree of economic dependency but capable of being differentiated from it; and (3) *national identity incompatibility*, a composite of the three national identity gaps within the triangle. States are presumed to strive to act within the triangular context to minimize strategic threat, reduce economic vulnerability, and check national identity incompatibility by boosting relations with the partner with a lesser national identity gap. At times, pursuit of these three objectives requires tradeoffs, as do the goals of maximizing economic growth and maintaining regime control. No one equation captures this mix of variables. Covering each in turn furthers a narrative about the state of each triangle at the start of the 2020s.

China, Russia, and North Korea loudly rail against the strategic threat posed not only by the United States but also by its alliances. In each triangle encompassing their countries, they define the threat posed by Washington as overwhelming in comparison to threats attributed to them and to the third-party present. While the United States' overall military power is the greatest of any country, this does not make it the greatest threat. Washington supports the status quo when democratic transformation and mutual threat reductions are not feasible. Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang are prone to use military force to alter the status quo in light of territorial claims, while seeking to undermine US alliances, including building up their forces and behaving assertively in gray zones. In each triangle, calculations can be made for the degree of strategic threat emanating from each side toward the other sides—a total of six separate estimates. States are heavily but not solely motivated by security.

If economic growth was a priority concern in the decade after the financial crash of 2008, as earlier, suddenly in 2018 economic dependency took center stage.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was reinterpreted as a “debt trap” that left states vulnerable to China’s application of economic pressure to insist on compensatory strategic benefits. Trade interdependence with the United States when Trump was applying sanctions willy-nilly also risked vulnerability. The atmosphere had abruptly shifted from the more Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and the wider their scope the better, to hedging one’s bets in the face of overreliance and protectionism. Biden altered the atmosphere from trade wars to decoupling of dual-use technologies, reasserting in a more strategic manner the importance of economic forces.

National identity gaps with the United States are universal since states reinforce their own identities by drawing a contrast with the single global center of identity images. In East Asia, historically and increasingly of late, states also assert their identities conscious of China’s national identity. Given heightened historical consciousness in the region, the identities constructed in one neighbor often conflict with those of another and are treated as very important for one’s own identity debate. Recognizing the reality of how identity matters in bilateral relations, we can reach beyond bilateral gaps to consider its triangular impact.

Three bilateral national identity gaps are present in a triangular set of relations. In cases of two democracies and one country deemed to be hostile to democratization, one would expect the democracies to have a smaller identity gap. Yet, if we understand identities to be compromised of multiple dimensions, then others—e.g., the historical dimension—might supersede the democracy-authoritarianism divide in identity construction. Simplification grounded in preoccupation with political systems does not suffice to capture all of the effects of national identity differences. In the case of our nine triangles, we can expect three overall patterns. In Part I, the pull of identities that are rooted in communist history, arguably, takes primacy in the three triangles. In Part III, the pull of shared democratic identities serves as the starting point for analyzing the way identities impact the triangle. Part II adds the most complex set of cases for our search for identity incompatibilities. In its quests for reunification and historical justice, South Korea has been driving for change.

The cases examined here reflect different and evolving triangular dynamics. In some, two of the three countries are closely aligned against a third state—e.g., lately Japan and the United States versus China or China and Russia versus the United States. This may be called a marriage, leaving the excluded party a pariah. In other cases, the three countries are joined together whether harmoniously or not, with two as spokes around one serving as a hub, as in the US-Japan-South Korea triangle, which represents a romantic triangle. When tensions prevail on all sides, as at times within the US-China-North Korea triangle, this has been dubbed a unit veto. Another arrangement we observe is when a working arrangement is achieved absent serious tensions, as in the case of the United States and Japan bringing India closer, pursuing in this *ménage à trois* a romantic triangle. States may strive not only to go from a marriage to a romantic triangle but also to hold the pivot position in a romantic triangle with better ties to the other two than they have with each other. I am indebted to Lowell Dittmer for these concepts and their application. They can be usefully kept in mind; however, I do not treat aspirations to move from one type

of triangle to another as driving forces, given the stress here on other factors besides power differentials and the balance of power impacting the observed triangular dynamics. This typology looms in the background in the coverage of the following chapters.

## Policy Implications

Recognizing the dynamics and driving forces of triangularity in East Asian relations is a foundation for strategic policymaking, but leadership is required to make the most of this analysis. As triangular dynamics have put an increasing premium on both clear-sighted analysis and coordinated, informed decision-making, both China and the United States in 2017–20 failed to meet the test. Xi's overconfidence and national identity hubris alienated many of China's neighbors. Trump's disdain for civil servants and lack of strategic policymaking infuriated US allies and partners alike. Biden's intentions are good, but he will have to dig the United States out of a hole of its own making and overcome policy divisions in Congress that put partisanship above a long-term, strategic agenda, as well as skepticism in countries burned by US fickleness and wary of what will follow after Biden.

Often missing along with attention to triangularity is recognition of the role of national identity gaps in bilateral relations. Managing them requires a more sustained process and closer attention to how gaps are widening or narrowing in dyads within each triangle. For example, in the Sino-Russian-US strategic triangle, Chinese hubris or Russian internal discord over identity that could spill over into a debate on China may be prerequisites for any US overtures to alter the existing triangular framework. Another example where the role of Washington could be a bigger factor, is the ROK-Japan-US alliance triangle, with South Korean younger generations turning more negative toward China and somewhat less so toward Japan, which may leave an opening to greatly boost triangular solidarity.

Three national identity variables are likely to have an outsize influence on the complex of triangles considered here: South Korean identity as the country most at the crossroads, US identity as the country recently jolted by a sharp identity clash, and Chinese identity as the driving force in overconfidently alienating countries in each of the triangles. Even if the United States is slow to find the cohesion most advantageous for the challenges ahead, there is a growing possibility that identity gaps with China, as has recently occurred in South Korea, will lead other countries to bend their triangular ties against China or closer to the United States and Japan as alternatives to China. North Korea shows scant indication of narrowing its identity gap with China, even if ties become somewhat closer, and Russia could prove sensitive to China in ways that widen their gap. Thus, even in the triangles favorable to China, identity gaps are not shifting in its direction. The United States is better positioned for now.

As we consider the dynamics of triangularity, we must consider whether the accelerating force of bipolarity in the 2020s will have a transformative impact. The countries that have pushed for the autonomous pursuit of change to the regional

architecture face new challenges. Russia's quest for a Greater Eurasian Partnership is being overwhelmed by China's BRI, as the asymmetry between the two powers widens and China shows less deference. As "wolf warrior," China is pressuring states more to commit to its side; it is harder also for South Korea to straddle the United States and China for the sake of its aspirations in North Korea. Thus, Russia finds it more difficult to separate itself from the Sinocentric ambitions of its quasi-ally, while South Korea is being driven more fully into the arms of its only ally, the United States—a choice Japan was already making by the late 2010s, as it doubled down on its alliance in pursuit of third-country reinforcement.

The situation in 2022 was transformed by Russia's aggression, harking back to a Cold War identity, appealing to China for support, and antagonizing most states. Bipolarity was on the rise, narrowing the scope of triangularity, but it is not eclipsing all of the forces let loose over the past decades. North Korea and India were committed to their autonomy as they reach out for leverage. South Korea tilted further to one side but may cling to some degree of independent initiative in parts of East Asia. The following chapters conclude with questions about the shifting mix of bipolarity and triangularity.

### Note on Omissions

Two omissions in this book deserve explanation. Given the intention to provide a broad framework, covering the most important triangles reshaping the international relations of the Indo-Pacific region between the end of the first Cold War in 1989–91 and the start of a second Cold War, notably in 2022, the focus is Northeast Asia. ASEAN is not considered a triangular actor; it was not a major voice nor were any of the countries of Southeast Asia in the security, economics, or national identity clashes of far-reaching importance. Only India and Australia in Asia's Southern Tier reach the threshold of significance and then in just one Quad with Japan and the United States in addressing China toward the end of the time span. The countries of Central Asia and Mongolia are excluded as not major actors. Were the focus on regional organizations and their limitations, a different framework would add these actors. Only the countries driving the evolution of triangularity are highlighted.

Second, footnotes are omitted because narrowing the number would have been difficult given the heavy reliance on primary sources, which have been identified in publications I have written or edited over more than four decades of following bilateral relations in this region. They are steeped in sources in Chinese, Japanese, and Russian, as well as English and a smattering of Korean. From 2013, summaries of sources in these languages have been posted bimonthly in *The Asan Forum* along with an array of articles that point the way to the contents of this book. Also serving as the research foundation are the annual books I have edited from 2012 for the Korean Economic Institute in the series Joint US–Korea Academic Studies, whose authors draw largely on primary sources. Commissioned articles have filled gaps in knowledge. Overall trends are emphasized, not statistics or details for each point in time, given the goal here of regional coverage in broad strokes.



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## **PART I**

# The Legacy of the Cold War



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# 2

## CHINA, RUSSIA, THE UNITED STATES

### The New Face of the Grand Strategic Triangle

When the Trump administration in October 2018 announced that it was pulling out of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty, it served as a wake-up call that the China-Russia-US axis is at the center of strategic thinking. Washington repeated claims that Moscow has been cheating on this signature treaty that built trust to end the Cold War, while asserting that because China is not bound by the treaty and keeps adding to its intermediate-range missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, the treaty was losing its relevance. Without this restraining force, observers anticipated that an arms race in strategic forces would ensue—now three ways instead of two. In 2021, there were reports that China was rapidly building up its strategic nuclear forces, as both China and Russia tested hypersonic missiles threatening to heighten the risk of nuclear war. In 2022, this situation was compounded by the global divide over the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Consciousness of triangularity had peaked in the 1970s–80s when Beijing turned to Washington to counter the Soviet threat and Americans heralded this bold stroke as transforming the balance of power. As Chinese and Soviets launched normalization talks in 1982 and edged toward their breakthrough of 1989, there was much talk of how the Grand Strategic Triangle could change: China achieving equidistance; Gorbachev veering to the United States in a marriage of two powers and after June 4, 1989, China being left as a pariah; or if Gorbachev's rivals gained power, the revival of a Sino-Soviet marriage. These heady days of triangular awareness ended abruptly when Russia replaced the Soviet Union after its collapse and the rejection of communism. Yet Chinese soon saw an opening to use a weakened power for triangularity, as did Russians by the mid-1990s. Only the US side was slow to awaken to resurgent triangularity.

Having subscribed to US unipolarity since the 1990s, some stuck to that notion. Some who accept rising signs of bipolarity with China refused to put Russia in the same grouping, although its weakness is much less than was China's in the

1970s–80s when China was recognized as part of a strategic triangle capable of shaking the structure of great power relations. After all, there is no need to assume an equilateral triangle in order to apply the logic of strategic triangularity. China at that time behaved as if it were able to alter the course of US–Soviet relations, acting in the context of that triangle. Similarly, Russia is now framing its behavior in the context of the China–Russia–US triangle, intent on changing the dynamics of great power relations. China tilted to the US side in 1971–72 to considerable effect, and Russia has tilted to the Chinese side since the 2000s in the hope of having great impact too and fueling its aggression toward Ukraine.

Despite economic weakness, how does Russia justify its claim to rank in the select top group of world powers? First, it not only possesses a nuclear arsenal and delivery systems that have long been viewed on a par with those of the United States, but it is also now intent on creating an atmosphere where they count for more in international affairs. Stirring up tensions serves that objective. The prospect of a new strategic arms race may appear daunting for a country with so weak a base to foot the bill, but it raises Russia's profile, serving the national identity it is constructing. Second, Russia is riding in China's wake, gaining credibility versus the United States via arms sales to China, military exercises with China, and Security Council coordination with its quasi-ally. For some, this close association with China is seen as weakening its claim to be a separate pole in either a triangular or a multipolar framework. This ignores the fact that China drew recognition as part of a strategic triangle precisely when it sided heavily with the United States against the Soviet Union. Moscow's foreign policy is sufficiently autonomous, as in its aggressive moves in Ukraine and Syria, to reinforce its narrative about being a pole. Third, Russia is treated by world leaders as a separate and significant international actor, whether Donald Trump, Abe Shinzo, the successive presidents of South Korea, or Xi Jinping. Some seek Vladimir Putin's help in dealing with bilateral issues, the Middle East, North Korea, or the threat of Sino-Russian ties growing stronger. Russia's pull exceeds its economic weight. For Xi, this is especially due to its salience in the triangle with the United States, giving Putin credibility as the third global leader. Similarly, US presidents—whether Trump or Joe Biden—treat summitry with Putin second only to that with Xi. In 2022, Putin made his case by war to be in the top group.

Under Biden, the US dual containment of China and Russia was more forthrightly acknowledged while talk of a Sino-Russian alliance rose more to the surface. When Biden met Putin in Geneva in June 2021, some speculated that this was an opening step to peel Russia away from China, and writings ensued on why Russian concern about the growing asymmetry with China could make it amenable to US overtures. Complicating the discussion was the tendency to focus only on power with perhaps a little coverage of economics without giving national identity its due recognition. The forces drawing Russia and China together have been underestimated, both in the bilateral context and in the triangular framework consistently meaningful to both Moscow and Beijing. In a triangular context cognizant of diverse dimensions, hopes to turn Russia appeared far-fetched.

Different interpretations have been offered of the Sino–Russia–US triangle. One viewpoint most heard in Russia is of a resurgent Grand Strategic Triangle more significant in world affairs than any other, reminiscent of the triangle of the 1970s–80s, albeit with a different power balance. In this perspective, the United States is no longer the pivot with better relations with the other two than they have with each other. Instead, Russia is at least potentially the pivot, even if at present it leans heavily toward China awaiting a US awakening to the value of avoiding an alliance or a “marriage” directed against it. This is becoming more probable as the expected downturn in the Sino–US relationship is taking place, Russians suggest. As Putin strove to bring this outcome to fruition, he continued to see the US side as the dominant power and China as the balancing force that needs to be reinforced in order to realize his ideal triangular configuration, in which the US need for Russia makes it overcome qualms, as it did when Nixon recognized Mao’s similar aim.

A second viewpoint, common in US thinking until recently, is that Russia is too insignificant to warrant talk of a strategic triangle or that it is too wary of China to proceed much further in that relationship. A variant of this thinking has been that Russia, as well as China, is too connected to international markets and finances to risk angering the United States and facing severe sanctions. Yet, that is precisely what Russia has done, showing that its energy-dependent economy is less subject to pressure than many others. Moreover, predictions of Russian fear of the “yellow peril,” territorial recidivism directed at the Russian Far East, and relegation to a “junior partner” and a “resource appendage” have not been confirmed over the years since such talk began in the 1990s.

A third perspective, recently ascendant, is that Sino–Russian relations are too strong to expect US leverage to make a big difference, obviating the value of thinking in terms of jockeying within a triangular framework. Whether because of national identity congruence or complementarity in their struggles for spheres of influence distant from each other, they are rather immovable by US policy options. That argument is not inconsistent with the notion of a strategic triangle, even if the time is not considered ripe for the pariah in the triangle to try to drive a wedge between the other two. Rather, this bolsters the case to study the dynamics of the triangle in order to grasp how it has been evolving and what options may emerge for planning the most useful response.

China has set as its foremost and most urgent priority the recovery of Taiwan. Russia’s focus is the revival of its hold over Ukraine. Both demand acceptance of their authoritarian system, not pressure over human rights and crackdowns on civil society. These issues are viewed first as in opposition to the United States and second as causes for which close ties with each other matter. As the US responds with technological decoupling in order to reduce economic vulnerability to China, China is no less obsessed with limiting its vulnerability—a big concern in Russia as well.

No triangle matters more for global security and the future of the international system. Within East Asia, Russia’s determination to assert its influence has raised this triangle’s profile as well.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 cast this triangle in a new perspective. The Chinese narrative that the United States was responsible for the

expansion of NATO and disregard for the legitimate security interests of Russia reinforced the view that China has joined Russia in moves to overturn the post-Cold War order, linking its plans to seize Taiwan by force to Russia's action. Yet Sino-Russian interests and timetables were not fully aligned. Russia's thrust to recalibrate the triangle with the United States created uncertainty about how China would react to the isolation and pushback by the United States and its wide-ranging coalition of allies and partners. Having sought to set the terms for the Grand Strategic Triangle ahead, as if China's concerns with other triangles do not matter, Russia has put triangularity to a greater test than at any point since the 1980s. It has assumed that China is ready for bipolarity, which was initially confirmed in the early days of war.

The United States responded to the Ukraine war by rallying states against Russia and preparing to isolate its economy. The implications for China were hard to overlook. By filling the vacuum for its close strategic partner, China risked being subject to similar sanctions and export controls. If it took coercive measures against Taiwan, the same coalition was poised to be mobilized against it.

### Tests of Triangularity over Three Decades

Moscow and Beijing missed their chance to seek an end to the Cold War that would keep the notion of the strategic triangle alive. Mikhail Gorbachev put too much faith in Soviet reform, US-Soviet relations as a pathway to sustain Soviet power and revive the economy, and assumptions of Chinese backwardness with little to offer. Deng Xiaoping delayed the normalization of relations in pursuit of reversing the Soviet military advance in Asia when that was unsustainable anyway. US confidence about how the Cold War ended; China's strategic weakness after June 4, 1989; and later the collapse of the Soviet Union took talk of triangular strategic dynamics off the table.

In the mid- to late 1990s, a supremely confident Washington ignored any triangular implications of expanding NATO to Moscow's displeasure and undertaking a show of strength to dissuade the People's Republic of China (PRC) from pressuring Taiwan. The earliest signs of a budding Sino-Russian strategic partnership were met with a shrug, assuming that Boris Yeltsin was too beholden to the West for economic recovery and Jiang Zemin also had sound economic reasons to avoid any serious challenge to US power and to US decisions to attack Serbia for humanitarian reasons and to forge new defense guidelines with Japan as a mechanism to reassert its power when East Asia tensions began to rise.

Chinese strategic thinking by the mid-90s weighed Russia heavily in limiting US power, while it was central to Vladimir Putin's worldview from the outset of his rule that China is key to balance US power. Attacks against US hegemonism became a cornerstone of a growing relationship—in the 2000s gaining heft as Russia revived as an energy power and as economic clout emboldened China. In the second half of the 2000s, Russia overtly challenged the US order—e.g., by fighting in Georgia—and across Asia, China discarded Deng's dictum to keep a low profile. Each was emboldened by the other and by a framework assuming the Grand Strategic Triangle existed.

The awakening to a revived strategic triangle became noticeable in the mid-2000s. If US actions in Iraq and the “color revolutions” on Russia’s borders were not yet viewed through this prism in Washington, Beijing and Moscow were so reinterpreting their ties after signing their 2001 treaty and negotiating a final border demarcation in 2004. Facing the vexing problem of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, Washington sought China’s help through Six-Party Talks and found increasing signs of Sino-Russian coordination. It became more concerned about Putin’s tone, at times recognizing that he was gaining boldness not only from his booming energy revenues but also from his relations with China. Yet at decade’s end, as China was growing more assertive, Dmitry Medvedev was encouraging a reset with the Obama administration. Triangularity had entered observer consciousness, but it remained in the shadows in the face of widespread doubts about the strength of the forces drawing Moscow and Beijing closer and confidence in US clout.

Such shortsighted thinking missed the rapidly increasing salience of this far-reaching triangle.

After 2008, the US star dimmed by virtue of the global financial crisis it unleashed, the failure of its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its domestic political impasse. Meanwhile, China’s policies grew more assertive, forcing a change in US strategy and drawing Russia somewhat closer. With the emergence of Xi as general secretary and the return of Putin as president, a personal bond added to the momentum of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership directed against US power.

The 2012 decision by Putin to “Turn to the East” upgraded China’s importance for Russia’s rise.

The Ukraine crisis in 2014 tested thinking about triangularity with mixed responses. Some kept to their certainty that Sino-Russian ties were fragile and marked by distrust. China’s support for the Russian aggression was ambivalent; Putin was welcoming Abe’s frequent overtures; the “docking” of Xi’s Silk Road Economic Belt and Putin’s Eurasian Economic Union in Central Asia was seen as problematic. Others treated Putin’s hardening posture toward the West and his “Turn to the East” as an invitation to Xi to draw closer and Xi’s rising assertiveness as bound to worsen relations with the United States, leading him to draw decidedly closer to Putin. Debate over the strength and durability of Sino-Russian relations intensified, arousing greater interest by the mid-2010s in what that may mean in the context of a strategic triangle framework.

By the beginning of 2019, four new forces were at work in the Sino-Russia-US strategic triangle. One, Sino-US relations had deteriorated to the point that many began anticipating a new Cold War. Two, Russo-US relations, despite Trump’s personal warmth toward Putin, had deteriorated in the aftermath of Russian interference in the 2016 elections and Russia’s aggressive moves abroad, as many recognized that Russia was calling this a Cold War. Three, Trump’s foreign policy was no longer being moderated by establishment figures; he had personalized the exercise of power in ways that increased the chances of confrontation, even if temporarily he might claim victory on the basis of the flimsiest of pretexts. This removed some brakes on tensions with China. Four, Xi and Putin found even more cause to strengthen

Sino-Russian relations, as they kept announcing upgrades in bilateral ties, and the use of the word “alliance” aroused alarm in the United States and elsewhere.

The strategic triangle was hard to miss any longer. The security postures of all three states made that clear. Economic sanctions were a clear sign of increased tensions. Narratives in each of the countries accentuated the differences or in the Sino-Russian case the commonalities. Overall, this was a quasi-alliance of countries that shared the legacy of traditional communist identities in opposition to a country insistent, under Trump, on its unilateral right to shape the world order to its own liking.

With the downturn in Sino-US relations from 2018, Russians foresaw Beijing turning to Moscow more eagerly, altering the dynamics of the triangle in many respects. They also perceived a softer Chinese attitude toward other Asian states to avoid a US-led coalition solidifying, which would open more space for Moscow to boost ties in Asia without concern over Beijing’s response. Yet, ignoring Russian designs for Greater Eurasia, China hardened its tactics. It became clear that Sinocentrism would move ahead with scant signs of consultations, obliging Russia to keep quiet.

Complicating the march toward an alliance were three factors separate from the role of the United States. One, China did not respect Eurasianism as the centerpiece in Russia’s “Turn to the East,” taking aim at India in a 2020 border skirmish as the most flagrant infringement on Russia’s strategy. The two quasi-allies had engaged in a cat-and-mouse struggle over the organization of Asia in the 2010s, as first China made a move and then Russia countered without acknowledging their rivalry, and this showed few signs of abating. Two, China was reticent about supporting Russian aggression in Europe but tacitly did so by putting the onus on the United States, and Russia was reserved about getting involved in China’s territorial clashes in East Asia but likewise did not blame its close partner. Such reservations worked against formal alliance ties, if not against coordination of aggressive moves if conflicts with the United States were to occur. Three, trust was insufficient, as seen in worries about a revival of China’s territorial claims in the Russian Far East, denial of access to Chinese museums of history, censorship of Russian sources in China, and pandemic closures. If such factors lurked in the shadows, the strategic triangle continued to monopolize center stage.

Few anticipated a balanced triangle: Russo-US relations were also deteriorating, giving Moscow no balancing role, and Russia’s turn to China was too deep and too subject to retaliation for it to gain much room to act independently. The Sino-Russian leg of the triangle remained secure, each needing the other more than before while doing little to alter Russia’s post-2014 greater need.

Biden set a strategic course consumed with China’s threat and faced the undiminished hostility of Russia, despite his June 2021 summit with Putin to set a floor under the relationship. Unlike Trump, he mobilized the government to face both challenges. In turn, Xi and Putin redoubled their commitment to challenging US leadership, complementing each other’s assertive behavior.

By early in the 2020s, Biden’s revival of multilateralism and strategic focus on China altered the context but did not transform the triangle much. Sino-US ties

were more systematically at odds. Russo-US ties were rocked by Putin's demands over Ukraine. And Sino-Russian ties were still drawing closer to an alliance. The lines were clearly drawn, but that did not rule out signs of lingering tension in Sino-Russian relations on security, economic, and national identity dimensions.

Putin's decision to invade Ukraine coming on the heels of Xi's intensified pressure on Taiwan with military action clearly on the table changed the equation in the Grand Strategic Triangle. It revived images of an iron curtain descending on Russia in diplomacy, information flows, and economic ties to the outside. After Putin and Xi met on February 4, 2022, as the Beijing Winter Olympics began, declaring "no limits" to the bilateral relationship and apparently getting Putin to agree to hold off on the start of the war until after the main phase of the Olympics, ties seemed stronger than ever and even more pointedly and militarily targeted against the United States. The tightening of this leg of the triangle, however, did not mean that maneuvering in this framework would end. If Russia had painted itself into a corner, China still had room to test new diplomacy.

## Strategic Threat

China, Russia, and the United States are armed in ways that pose potential threats to each other, and idealistic narratives only obscure their awareness of this reality. The degree of perceived threat, however, is a function of strategic goals in the short term more than of long-term logic. Both China and Russia are prone to a lot of hype about US threats, regardless of what they may really think. In 2016, China hyped the threat from US defensive missiles installed in South Korea as if this were the greatest disruption to the regional power balance, ignoring North Korea's new missile threats. Russia echoed China's charges. In 2021–22, Russia hyped the threat of US arms sales to Ukraine, ignoring the defensive justification for its own threatening moves. Such exaggerated language is excluded here, as we search for the actual impact of strategic threats in the triangle.

China's strategic priorities are, arguably, fourfold: (1) regain control over Taiwan; (2) solidify dominance in the South China Sea; (3) secure passage and support for an increasingly blue-water navy, breaching the first and then the second island chain; and (4) weaken the US alliances in the Indo-Pacific and make certain that they are not extended, for example, to North Korea. The recognized threat in each case is the United States. Not only does Russia not pose a threat in any of these venues, but its military buildup also serves to distract the United States from concentrating on what China is doing. Moreover, regime survival is seen as much more threatened by the way the US side wields its power—as against North Korea—than the way Russia operates internationally. Thus, the Chinese perceive a far greater strategic challenge from the United States than Russia.

Russia's strategic priorities are unmistakably to reestablish a sphere of influence, primarily but not exclusively, in the territory of the former Soviet Union, and to put security in the forefront in international relations so countries will have to take Russia's claim to power seriously. This pits Moscow against Washington and the

West, which have pursued NATO expansion into the very areas Russia regards as its rightful sphere. Moreover, it is Washington that needs to be awakened to Russia's military power in order to ensure that the international community gives it suitable recognition. China's encroachments in Central Asia and Eastern Europe are regarded as heavily economic with more deference to Russia and less co-optation of local elites. China's security aims are focused elsewhere. Its rise and growing assertiveness as a competitor to the United States are welcomed. Indeed, Russian arms sales have given a big boost to China's capabilities to pose a threat to what many in Russia regard as the common enemy. Some demagogues in the 1990s had warned of a China threat before Putin repressed such talk except from the margins of the political spectrum, and even they now couch such concerns indirectly—more as right-wing unilateralism than as pro-West internationalism. Dissent over threat perceptions is kept in check, as in China.

US threat perceptions are more muddled, given the democratic environment and Trump's impact, sometimes at odds with the security community and at other times driving it faster to where it had been heading. As recently as 2017, Trump was cultivating closer ties to Putin, which seem to be his obsession, and Xi, expressing gratitude for cooperation over North Korea. Yet, in spite of Trump's over-the-top rhetoric, the choice of John Bolton as his national security advisor gave added momentum to the prevailing current in Congress and the US security community: the US side was ready for a new Cold War, blaming both China and Russia but not consulting much.

The Biden era prioritized the China threat while recognizing the need to stand firm against what, at first, appeared to be the more limited Russian threat, although it could be pronounced as in cybersecurity or could rise to the fore given Putin's penchant for using military force. Biden may have watched for an opening should Sino-Russian tensions increase, but wishful thinking was absent. Given new Sino-Russian coordination, the Biden administration was more attuned to dangers seen in the triangular context. In 2022, there was no denying the dual threat to security.

The triangle is most consequential and, increasingly, equilateral in the security dimension. For Russia, bringing security to the forefront enabled it to play the "triangle card." For China, only when its military power had become sufficient to pose a serious threat to seize Taiwan by force could it gain the confidence to transform triangular dynamics to its satisfaction. The US calculus shifted too, largely on the basis of this dimension in this single triangle. Other dimensions matter greatly at times, but this one increasingly became the bedrock of urgent triangular calculations.

Were this triangle to be solely a function of military power differentials, the accelerating Sino-Russian asymmetry would offer hope to those in the United States who advocate wooing the Russians through arms control and other concessions such as removing any threats of sanctions against countries that purchase its S-400 missile defense system. As a neighbor with territory and allies deemed to be exposed to China's potential advancement, Russia is vulnerable according to this logic. Analysis of other factors more fully reveals why this logic has failed to be persuasive.

Through the 2020s, Sino-Russian arms sales, military exercises, and mutual support for adverse behavior against the United States and its alliances have little chance to be reversed. Security interests—if more due to plans for aggression than to perceived threats to territory China or Russia controls—keep driving calculations about this triangle. The United States will remain the pariah in this reconstituted grand triangle.

The Ukraine war put military conflict, arms buildups, and control over dual-use exports at the top of the agenda. The United States sought to avoid escalation into a Russo-US war, while China did not plan to directly support the Russian war effort. Across East Asia, eyes were fixed on how war in Ukraine could impact the potential for war in Taiwan. Would China learn the lesson to avoid similar isolation and condemnation by delaying coercive reunification, or would it follow this precedent? Much depended on its assessment of the effectiveness of the US response to Russia.

### **Economic Vulnerability**

The Cold War witnessed a division into two blocs, neither of which had a lot of vulnerability to the other economically. In the 1990s and, arguably, over much of the 2000s, the state of Sino-US trade made China the more vulnerable party, while Russia's weak economy made it even more vulnerable to pressure if ties with the United States and its allies were called into question. Given the prevailing caution in Moscow and Beijing and US optimism about the impact of integration into the global economy, there was little talk of economic pressure as an instrument of power.

High energy prices finally gave Russia confidence that it could directly confront Washington. The global financial crisis was the turning point giving China similar confidence. Moreover, US dependency on China's economy was rising to the point that some, at least in China, began to think that they were gaining the upper hand. As the US applied sanctions on both Russia and China for newly aggressive moves, they downplayed their vulnerability. In turn, China warned countries of their economic vulnerability, targeting US allies such as South Korea and Australia. If some in Russia began to worry about future vulnerability due to rising asymmetry with China's economy, this was not treated as urgent. Yet on all sides, this dimension gained a foothold in thinking about not only bilateral relations in an era of high technology but also about strategic triangle concerns.

The United States beckoned to a desperate Russia under Yeltsin and to China as China sought to enter the World Trade Organization (WTO) to join the long-established and newly accelerating, integrated global economy. Washington was a critical arbitrator of the rules and expected to see the other two transformed without effect from their ties to each other. In the 2000s, Putin gained confidence that he could mitigate the economic pressure and pursue an independent foreign policy regardless of Washington's wishes, treating Beijing as a partner, especially for energy and natural resource exports. In turn, China's leaders saw growing trade with Russia as a tool to draw it closer politically and reduce vulnerability to a possible energy blockade. The economic factor was important for transforming this triangle.

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis and then after Western sanctions were imposed about five years later for Russian aggression in Ukraine, Sino-Russian pipelines and trade expanded. There was talk of creating a financial and trade system exclusive of the West, but this was more bluster than reality through the 2010s.

The strategic triangle was marked by greater economic confrontation between the United States and the other two by the late 2010s. Russia responded to sanctions defiantly, although hopes that China would come to its rescue with massive investments or a surge in trade were mostly dashed. In the case of China, the response was more cautious, waiting for more clarity on Trump's aims and more insight on the degree to which he could harm China's economic growth. The deep interdependence of the Chinese and US economies added a twist to a possible Cold War scenario unlike any before. Yet, in Trump's trade war, many in China presumed that China had the edge.

With Biden as president, a strategy of decoupling became carefully targeted at dual-use items of high technology, while tariffs were sustained to limit excessive dependency on Chinese supplies. Export controls and supply chain diversification were long-term priorities, not spontaneous acts of a disgruntled politician. High volumes of trade and huge trade deficits continued. Reducing US vulnerability and negligent complicity in a widely abused economic partnership gave the United States less reason to restrain policies in order not to cause undue economic harm.

Strategic thinking was upgraded in economic policy as companies were pressed to not rely on market considerations alone. Such recalculations were accelerated by Chinese decisions to pressure foreign companies to yield to more state intervention, to transfer technology in return for more market access, and by 2021 to accept much greater Communist Party interference in the economy. The trade war of Trump had morphed into strategic decoupling to reduce vulnerability to economic weapons. The Biden administration was forging an economic framework for the Indo-Pacific before the events of early 2022 overtook its plans and created a new context.

The Russian economy is but a small fraction of the US and Chinese economies. Around 2010 it was at a crossroads. Modernization was a buzzword with talk of prioritizing high-tech industry, requiring foreign direct investment (FDI), cooperation closely with Western firms, and building a more open, market-driven economy. Instead, Putin doubled down on making Russia an energy superpower, both turning to China's market and guarding against greater economic dependence on the West. Reorientation gained pace with the imposition of economic sanctions after Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014. If benefits from China fell far short of what was heralded, calculations of economic dependency were one of the reasons. Russia was loath to open up, allowing dependency on Chinese labor, FDI, and Chinatowns, only belatedly opening energy to investments. In stages, Russia relaxed restrictions on China and built a nest egg in preparation for conflict with the West. Once war began, however, Russia's economy was battered with no prospect that China could help much, even if China could take some steps to keep it afloat.

Chinese banks, apart from small regional ones, fear punishment from US financial institutions for violating sanctions with North Korea or Russia, having earlier paid

a price for dealings with a sanctioned Iran. As sanctions against Russia mounted in 2018, complaints were heard from some Russians that Chinese banks were refusing to conduct transactions. End runs were tried through states once part of the Soviet Union to relieve the Chinese of concern. Talk spread of a financial mechanism, as well as of conducting trade in local currencies to bypass the international system. The essence of the problem is that China as a major player in international trade is vulnerable to pressure more than Russia is. If Sino-Russian economic ties have often aimed at avoidance of the threat of US-led pressure—China’s quest for secure energy routes, Russia’s desperation to lower dependence on the West by turning to China for certain industrial goods, and an arms trade—then the two lacked the economic strength to establish an alternate system that would bypass the pressure.

Sino-Russian economic ties were growing, giving China a measure of energy security and Russia an energy outlet free of Western pressure. Yet, they failed to develop the interdependence that would do much to mitigate outside pressure. Russian trade was too small a fraction of total trade; Russia was too unattractive a target for large-scale Chinese investment; it remained too protectionist to allow great cross-border integration, free trade, or much migration. Limits on bilateral economic ties and the absence of like-minded countries to compensate for possible loss of economic ties to the United States and its allies and partners put a damper on strategic links.

The economic impact of the Ukraine war was comparable to the security impact. Suddenly, the Russian economy was battered into free fall from US-led sanctions. US economic leverage had proven to be a significant factor influencing triangular dynamics, including warnings to China against violating certain sanctions. If Russia had assumed that it could greatly compensate for its losses in the West and with US allies elsewhere, China was tested on how far it was prepared to go to bolster an international pariah, which had unleashed a brutal war with no justifiable cause. It was obvious to China’s leaders that it could be subject to a parallel set of economic pressures.

## National Identity Incompatibility

National identities are steeped in symbols. The vocabulary of Sino-Russian relations is replete with talk of “anti-hegemonism” or other rhetoric in opposition to the US-led international order, and, under Biden, the United States has doubled down on talk of the “democratic community,” human rights, and other shared values in opposition to an authoritarian order of China and Russia.

National identities evolve over centuries, but leaders can deliberately reconstruct them, drawing on parts of the legacy they inherited. As Russia grappled with the search for the “Russian Idea,” Putin took charge, drawing heavily on the Soviet legacy. Dissatisfied with Deng’s way of resolving the post-Mao identity crisis, Xi proclaimed the “China Dream,” redefining national identity through elements of both imperial China’s Sinocentrism and Maoist socialist revival. Trump faced a bigger challenge in sweeping away much of the postwar, bilateral consensus with a call to “America First” and hostility to diversity and internationalism. If Biden was

intent on returning to a pre-Trump worldview, he struggled with a sharp partisan divide. In reconstructing identities, leaders also altered the impact of national identity on bilateral relations, which especially affected the sensitive identity gaps with others in the Grand Strategic Triangle.

In the late Cold War era, the Soviet-US identity gap took center stage, the Sino-Soviet clash was rife with attacks against each other's identity, and the Sino-US rapprochement struggled with the realization that identity differences remained profound. Optimism that globalization and the end of the Cold War and communist bloc would sweep these gaps aside was misplaced. The reform course in China was tempered by moves to reinforce the identity gap with the United States. The crisis of belief in Russia was short-lived before distancing from the United States gained traction. Finally, claims to be the real home of socialism disappeared in Sino-Russian exchanges, as the two found identity grounds to assert their commonalities in the face of joint opposition to US identity triumphalism.

Sino-US and Russo-US identity divides have been widening for more than a quarter century. The rhetoric of demonization of the United States became commonplace in China and Russia by the beginning of the 2010s and has only intensified. The United States eventually reciprocated to both antagonists. Tight censorship against mutual accusations prevails in China and Russia, as they insist on harmonious understanding in support of an ever-closer partnership. Identity analysis is key to triangularity.

It is not that Russia and China feel cultural affinity despite two decades of proclaiming that they were fostering it and rising levels of mutual public opinion support. They do not have the kind of closeness that the people of the United States have long enjoyed with people in allied countries and beyond. Each is also too focused on constructing a suspicious outlook to the outside world in general to leave room for genuine bilateral trust. Yet, in a trilateral context their attitudes on the various dimensions of national identity draw them close and separate them sharply from the third party, which matters more than any other as the national identity "other." Each strives to widen the identity gap with the United States and is content to keep the Sino-Russian gap rather narrow.

The national identity argument against close Sino-Russian ties is three-fold. First, they suffered through the Sino-Soviet split with venomous mutual accusations as if their identities were fully at odds. Yet, that was a time when communist ideology rigidly interpreted by Mao Zedong and Leonid Brezhnev dominated identity construction, which is no longer the case. Second, signs of a far-reaching identity transformation in Russia in the 1990s with the rejection of Communist Party rule left the erroneous impression that the overall national identity legacy of communism had been displaced, leaving Moscow and Beijing with little in common. Closer examination of the various dimensions of their identities and how they have evolved, especially under Putin and Xi, should dissuade us from that misjudgment. Finally, there remains the notion that Russia is inherently part of the West, and China's identity is overwhelmingly rooted in its traditional thinking disinclined to find common ground outside of East Asia. This minimizes the shared impact of communist ways of shaping national identity and their lingering impact,

although it rightly recognizes some salient differences. One can cite: respect for the achievements under communist rule and hostility to the West nurtured by many of the same criticisms heard when anti-imperialism was a mainstay of ideological socialization. More detailed similarities appear when we go through a list of five dimensions of national identity that pertain to the present.

Once class struggle and unbridled ideological dogmatism were rejected, ideology was left with other legacies of the pre-Gorbachev and pre-Deng eras. Russians were susceptible to lingering superpower identity, obsessed with acceptance as an equal of the United States. However much China had been vilified in the throes of the Sino-Soviet split, its heresy was confined to rivalry over which pursuit of communism was purer—something quickly set aside by both parties. As each sought to reclaim socialist history through a limited set of symbols, they found that Mao and Stalin and the achievements of an era could be separately celebrated not in opposition to each other but as foundations for asserting identity in the face of histories spread in the West. Socialism was reemphasized—more so in China—as part of an ideological identity. China did not have a superpower identity to reassert, but it drew on arrogance as the leader in building communism as the highest stage of development for similar ideas of autonomy and superiority. It had no need to think further about balancing Moscow, leaving only the United States as its ideological obsession for asserting superiority. Just as Russocentrism intensified with the West as its target, reviving anti-imperialist narratives of Soviet times, Sinocentrism was focused on the United States and its partners in Asia. Ideology centering on these themes stifled dissent. Little-challenged assumptions coupled with tightened censorship drove the revival of ideology.

History is another dimension of identity that facilitated closer Sino-Russian ties and wider gaps with the United States. It had been the most conspicuous battleground in the Sino-Soviet split, but Russians lost interest in the divisions in communist history, and China took care to muffle anger over tsarist imperialism while giving vent to outrage over the century of humiliation by demonizing the histories of Japan and the West. In turn, Russia accentuated the adverse nature of Western history and Western behavior toward it, as it reconnected with the tsarist era. Sharing the same targets of opprobrium and purposefully keeping quiet about what divided them over history, Beijing and Moscow twisted history into a force for shaping the triangle versus the United States. Yet much as Sinocentrism, as it keeps gathering force, could clash with Russocentrism, history holds a time bomb for Sino-Russian relations of territorial revanchism in China, despite mutual claims to have resolved matters in the 2004 demarcation. In July 2020, a Chinese reaction to the celebration in Russia of the 160th anniversary of the establishment of Vladivostok raised alarm. Most important, however, was a narrative of injustice at the hands of the West or the United States, refocused on damming the recent, negative US role in Taiwan and Ukraine.

Assertions of civilizational distinctiveness and superiority comprise a third dimension of national identity, along with ideology and history. This proceeded quickly in China on a firm foundation in mounting attacks in the 1990s against Western “cultural imperialism.” There was no interest in seeking civilization overlap with Russia or in criticizing its civilization, which had no appeal. For Putin,

determination to reconstruct Russia as a distinct civilization also left China aside and treated the West as an existential threat. It was attacked for plotting to destroy the essence of Russianness by imposing a universal civilization. In championing multipolarity, Russia had in mind noninterference in its civilization, as well as internal politics, taking satisfaction that the Chinese embraced multipolarity and noninterference too. The vilified liberal, international order has a major civilizational component in the overlapping Russian and Chinese renderings.

Another dimension of identity that follows closely on the aforementioned is veneration of the state over societal forces—religious activism, nongovernmental organizations, legal restrictions, the media, and business interests. When Putin purged oligarchs not totally subservient to the state and Xi squeezed and often charged with corruption business leaders deemed to have too much independence, this dimension rose to the fore. Xenophobia spread, crackdowns on foreign news outlets occurred, and earlier openness was curtailed. Neither Russia nor China was spared from the other side's restrictions, as in the limits on Chinese immigration and businesses in Russia and the closed nature of China to Russian news and publications, but the overwhelming focus was on the danger of US penetration of each society. Supposed US anti-communism or Cold War mentality seemed to writers in both countries to be directed at overthrowing the regime and the existing order. Yet a strain of post-Soviet democracy remained in Russia troubled by rising authoritarianism and also watchful of the course of China's authoritarianism. In the period 1975–83, Russian critics of “stagnation” had found an opening in criticisms of China's extreme system, leaving parallels for readers to impute, and this could have revived by 2020 in carefully couched comments on China.

The fifth identity dimension to draw Moscow and Beijing closer is thinking on the international order and their own separate regional orders. While tension exists in viewpoints on Central Asia, views on parts of the Soviet Union in Europe matter much more for Russia and on East Asia matter much more for China. Their regional aspirations pose conflicts, as in Russian interest in Vietnam and Chinese interest in Ukraine, but the differences are manageable, given geographical priorities. Unifying is their hostility to the US-led international order and support for the Security Council having a greater say, given the veto power each wields there. This is just one additional dimension tilting the triangle to a Sino-Russian marriage, but one with potential rising strains.

“Wolf warrior” thinking in China by the early 2020s had raised some concern in Russia, as it has even been expressed versus Russians despite its greater prevalence in other Chinese bilateral ties. The fear is that Chinese arrogance does not allow room for equal relations and could even lead to the revival of revanchism targeted at the Russian Far East. A latent national identity gap has yet to complicate relations in a trilateral context, but both sides are taking care to keep it under wraps.

An obsessive identity gap for a quarter century drove Moscow and Beijing to what both regard as a disastrous outcome in 1991. A tightly managed narrative about their identity gap has served to keep the focus on their gaps with the United States. This is viewed in both as a successful strategy, and it is unlikely to change given the

even more pronounced mobilization of hostility toward the United States visible in the early 2020s. Moscow and Beijing have strong incentives to keep to this strategy, but Russia carried the identity arguments to an extreme in 2022, as if Ukraine had no right to exist, not China's thinking but tainting China with guilt by association.

## Dynamics of the China-Russia-US Strategic Triangle

The old strategic triangle has reemerged after a hiatus, an anomaly that can be attributed to Deng's caution and long-run approach prioritizing economic ties over security interests and Gorbachev's boldness also with economic urgency in the forefront. Their emergence was a consequence of dogmatic ideology hijacking national identity in the eras of Mao and Brezhnev inheriting the Stalinist legacy. Old strategies had reached a dead-end, including the disastrous preoccupation with the intra-communist identity gap that had left Moscow and Beijing ill prepared to heal their split in a timely manner. Incapable of settling on a balancing strategy in the critical 1980s, which would have limited US leverage, both sides succumbed to triangular marginality with the US side in the commanding pivot. Yet, once they had committed to economic priorities in light of the weakness of command economies in urgent need of reform, reconciling to such marginality was an understandable choice, as they cozied up to each other in preparation for a marriage that made sense to their strategists from the mid-90s. In the 2000s, the strategic triangle was reviving, and by the 2020s, it had become a fixture in the global order.

In the 1990s, some in the United States anticipated a romantic triangle with Russia democratizing, no longer a security threat, and economically integrating into the US-led order, while China would be more aloof but posing no security threat and even more rapidly embracing a market economy, putting international trade in the forefront. By the late 1990s, these hopes were dashed. China's rejection of the West in 1989 had been confirmed, economic integration was limited in critical ways, and its security autonomy was more manifest. Russia chafed at its security and economic marginality while insisting on its national identity gap with the United States. No longer a pivot, the United States faced a unit veto of three powers suspicious of each other, but the other two found some success in identity overlap if little in economics and security. As oil prices remained low and China strove to join the WTO while US military power reigned supreme, Sino-Russian ties raised scant concern.

Over the next two decades, the triangle strongly tilted to a marriage of China and Russia, leaving the United States a pariah. The only country that had a chance to become the pivot in the triangle was Russia, which in the 2000s gained the economic clout and military confidence to reassert its autonomy. Washington even encouraged this possibility with Obama's "reset" when Medvedev, as president, seemed inclined to foster economic integration beyond just energy exports and the nation's bridging role as Eurasianism embracing both ends. Yet, as Putin made clear in returning to the presidency, Russian identity did not leave room for anything but demonization of the United States and the West. It needed to restore the glory of

Soviet times with military muscle befitting a top-tier power, a sphere of influence reflecting the Soviet legacy, and an assertive identity opposed to that of the West. The only option was to boost relations with China in a marriage opposed to the United States. This resulted in today's close ties versus a shared enemy.

Why would the Sino-Russian marriage run aground? Three reasons have been suggested: Russian discontent about being a "junior partner" and insistence on a status unachievable given a weaknesses; Chinese arrogance or even irredentism and insistence on converting a higher status in the international and, especially, regional order into Sinocentrism insensitive to Russia; and US adeptness at driving a wedge between the two, drawing on the formidable assets still at its disposal. None has much likelihood. Russia's strategic status keeps being raised by its marriage to China; its economy is growing more dependent on China; its national identity has been boosted by linking up with China and disengaging from the West. For China, there are ample ways to keep Russia in line, with both carrots and sticks. Deference can be extended in Central Asia, more economic linkages are within easy reach, and care in arousing national identity concern among Russians are all promising strategies. For the United States the price of trying to lure Russia away from China given Putin's expansionist and hostile policies and his national identity narratives is probably unimaginable. Since Russia is widely viewed as the side in this triangle most susceptible to flipping or even adjusting its position, these realities should give us confidence that the basic framework of the revived strategic triangle is enduring.

It is not an anomaly owing to misconceived US policies in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, as some have argued for each of these decades. In the 1960s, Mao's ideological extremism rent the Sino-Soviet alliance. In the 1970s, Brezhnev's blindness to strategic realism left meant that the Sino-Soviet split would be much more difficult to overcome. In the 1980s, both Gorbachev and Deng allowed economic priorities to overwhelm strategic ones to an unusual degree. Putin and Xi have taken the track most consistent with the communist legacy which they inherited, treating Gorbachev as a pariah and Deng as someone whose glory was much oversold. US policy adjustments to the strength of this close strategic partnership were more likely to be reinforcing the value of their marriage to Beijing and Moscow than causing either to seriously reevaluate ties.

Only a widening national identity gap poses some danger of destabilizing this marriage. On the Russian side, there is no will to raise identity issues with China. After the "yellow peril" hysteria in the Russian Far East in the 1990s and in light of assessments of the enormous costs of the ideological war of the 1960s–80s, Russians are determined to keep identity off the table. Just two sources of a serious renewal of identity tensions can be presumed: (1) Chinese arrogance leads to criticisms of Russia, reviving the territorial claims, which would shock Russia into retaliation in its rhetoric, and (2) Russian dissent over Putin's war or authoritarianism leads to a shake-up. A combination of the two forces is unlikely to result from some US intervention, so the best that might be achieved by those anxious to alter the dynamics of this triangle is patient attentiveness to how Chinese and Russians are talking about each other in case an opportunity should arise.

The Sino-Russian marriage is likely to be secure through the 2020s with little that the United States can do without capitulating to one or both adversaries. Security is a driver, with both Beijing and Moscow seeking expansive moves. Economics is less problematic in light of rising trade levels and decoupling tendencies in high tech with the United States and its allies. Capping the strategic marriage are enormous identity gaps with the United States, along with censorship to repress the potential for a Sino-Russian gap to gain traction. The perceived stakes in the triangle are so great that the limited perturbations in bilateral dealings have little chance of causing a split. Bipolarity marginalizes Russia, and Sinocentrism leaves it less able to balance China in Asia. Yet Russian aggression creates a wildcard with potential to dash expectations.

The Ukraine war superseded all Russian reservations about China and deepened the gap with the United States. It appeared to reinforce China's demonization of the United States too. The triangle was in flux with one leg hardening in solidarity and the other two atrophying in conflict. Bipolarity was on the rise, subsuming this triangle. Yet China still had options, and Russian failure in Ukraine had the potential to induce change. The year 2022 had become a watershed in this key triangle.

The Grand Strategic Triangle has gained force in a context of rising bipolarity. The United States seeks China's help to rein in Russian aggression. Russia calls on China to give it more support. If Russia should fail in Ukraine, some wonder if it would turn to the US. In sight, a stronger Sino-Russian marriage is in the offing.

# 3

## CHINA, RUSSIA, NORTH KOREA

### The Shadow of the Socialist Bloc

North Korea has significance to its neighbors, China and Russia, for security, economics, and national identity in ways that undercut South Korea's aspirations and US policy objectives. It was never abandoned by China, either in the two decades after the Sino-US breakthrough or in the period from 1992 when China normalized relations with South Korea. Although it briefly lost Russia's support, Russia realized following the US-Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) Agreed Framework in 1994 that it had been left fully marginalized and resumed strategizing about ways to improve ties as a pathway to increased influence in Northeast Asia and other objectives. Looming in the background for both great powers is a quadrangle with South Korea, deemed vulnerable to policy shifts due to its goal of reunification and the menace posed by the North, and with the United States, searching for a way to remove a rising threat and to manage multilateral diplomacy conducive to its leadership. By bolstering ties to Pyongyang, Beijing and Moscow forge a bloc with regional ramifications. Yet Pyongyang has a say too, and it seeks unification on its own terms, perhaps at odds with its old allies in the means it applies.

Sino-Russian relations have other triangular dimensions besides the United States and North Korea, but those lack the same strategic urgency. There is Central Asia, over which they have forged a division of labor with limited strategic risk in the foreseeable future. India figures into their triangular logic, but the US relationship with India supersedes the rising impact of India of late in their mutual maneuvering. Southeast Asia poses some challenges, given Russia's ties to Vietnam, as well as a few other states there, but China is tolerant for now, and Russia defers to it on most strategic matters. Similarly, China is somewhat deferential in zones where Russia takes the lead without forsaking its independent diplomacy with economics in the lead. Thus, North Korea is the prime case of an active triangular strategic dynamic, and it has the added salience of bringing the socialist legacy into the picture for two powers influenced by that identity feature.

The Korean Peninsula served as the testing ground for great power relations at the beginning of the Cold War, and it retains that mystique as well as relevance as those relations are being tested anew. North Korea is still the bulwark against the advance of US power and ideology, while it is now also the gateway to South Korea, which is perceived as a swing country that can potentially be flipped from its US alliance. A weak and helpless North Korea would have fallen prey to the expansion of US forces, the reinforcement of South Korea's economic clout, and the reopening of the campaign to prove that socialism has been left in the dustbin of history. A strengthened North Korea can add to the pressure on South Korea, force US concessions and retreat, and change the national identity discussion. Yet an insubordinate and strong North Korea can pose countless problems for China and Russia too. Finding the right balance in this triangle remains challenging.

Given that nations active in the region are loath to live with the threat of war, when that threat grows, it fuels a sense of relief once diplomacy is revived. This was palpable in 2018, leading to a sense of satisfaction that talks were underway—a status quo welcomed in Beijing and Moscow as long as they had a central role, not if the US-ROK-DPRK triangle had center stage. Their goal is less denuclearization than transition as first Washington needs to recognize that Pyongyang has the upper hand and abandon its strategy in favor of a process marked by tiny steps portrayed liberally as denuclearization in return for big concessions on security and economics; then Seoul must push ahead with economic ties that are misleadingly portrayed as reunification measures while agreeing to large-scale infrastructure construction beneficial to Russia and China; finally, a multilateral security and economic agenda must be negotiated favorable to North Korea and transformative for Northeast Asia. In the US-North Korean talks of 2018–19, China felt bypassed, but Kim Jong-un met with Xi Jinping five times counteracting that and also went to Russia. They expected a breakdown, which they could blame on Washington, leading to more likelihood that Kim would turn to Beijing and Moscow for the kind of bilateral ties and triangle they are seeking, but the pandemic put that on hold, as did Kim's seeming reluctance.

Will denuclearization of North Korea occur? China and Russia do not think so, placing blame on the United States for failure to offer the necessary incentives and reassurances, which they have hesitated to spell out in full. Their main goal is the process of transition in the region, rooted in diplomacy that advances slowly until Washington discards its current thinking about what can be possible. Washington will keep having to prove itself, as Pyongyang yields a little here and there, serving Beijing and Moscow's interests in the process. Once the United States is humbled and sanctions relaxed, the opportunity could arise for a flowering of the Sino-Russian-North Korean triangle.

The previous scenario has one caveat. North Korea fears falling under China's control. While that is less immediate a threat than absorption by South Korea or regime change forced by the United States, it complicates the pursuit of a socialist triangle. Balancing China with Russia offers only a slight respite, especially given Russia's deference to China. Thus, no alliance triangle is in sight, even if an overall understanding that the three stand together on key challenges is increasingly clear.

On security, economics, and national identities, North Korea values its autonomy, but it also is loath to yield to South Korea or the United States, leaving it edging closer to a “socialist” triad. The Ukraine war solidified this triangle, as North Korea gave its full backing to Russia and could expect fuller support, while China repeated Russian claims.

### Tests of Triangularity over Three Decades

In the first stage of diplomacy in 1993–94, Pyongyang drew attention for its pursuit of nuclear weapons, but it did not yet have them; its backing from Russia and China was minimal; the conservative leadership in Seoul was seen as of little help except in opposing a US military strike. At stage two in 2003–8, it claimed to be a nuclear weapons state (punctuated by its first test in 2006); its economy had stabilized; the progressive leadership in Seoul split with Washington on the diplomatic process; Beijing and Moscow were growing more assertive in dealing with US–North Korean relations. When Kim turned to diplomacy in the third stage in 2018, conditions were favorable for his country—worsening US relations with both Russia and China, heightened threat potential, and a welcoming president in South Korea. If Donald Trump’s foreign policy was generally denounced in China and Russia, his odd embrace of Kim was welcomed, albeit as an opening gambit with uncertain prospects, due more to Trump than Kim. After all, the US side was guilty of spoiling the previous diplomatic processes, in this assessment, Trump had just pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal demonstrating the unreliable nature of US agreements, as well as the illusions in the United States seen as continuously undermining pragmatic diplomacy.

In the first half of the 1990s, Pyongyang turned against both Moscow and Beijing after ties had been strained by reform initiatives in the two states, their warming relations with the United States, and, as the final betrayal, normalization with Seoul. Given the importance of relations with Washington after Deng Xiaoping endorsed “market socialism” and Boris Yeltsin turned to the West for economic salvation, a resentful Pyongyang opted to go it alone, despite the weighty consequences in famine, as well as isolation. Yet Beijing kept providing life support and took a hands-off approach, if possible, as tensions over its nuclear weapons program escalated. Moscow found it intolerable to be left on the outside in 1994 when an agreement was struck between Washington and Pyongyang, while Beijing knew that it still wielded influence. Putin’s stop in Pyongyang in 2000 signaled Russia’s return to the maneuvering over the future of nuclear weapons in North Korea and of its regime. It drove the revival of this “socialist legacy” triangle.

Triangularity evolved within the context of the Six-Party Talks and their breakdown. Habits of consultation were established, as Beijing and Moscow found themselves in agreement versus the United States in seeking more concessions to Pyongyang, blaming the United States for the collapse of the talks, and choosing in 2010 not to pin the blame on Pyongyang for the sinking of South Korea’s *Cheonan*. Agreement on diplomacy with North Korea contributed to Sino-Russian ties growing closer. Their writings reinforced a shared worldview steeped in the Korean War.

The Sino-Russian-North Korean triangle has been tested at times. One factor was differences in Chinese and Russian priorities and the initial guardedness in their relationship. From about 2004 in the context of the Six-Party Talks, they coordinated more, based on Russian deference. The closer Sino-Russian relations grew, the more they collaborated, based on Russian hopes that China would take its interests into account, despite frequent suspicions that China did not trust or even welcome Russia's policies toward the North. But North Korea, fearing overdependence on a heavy-handed China, kept ties with Russia on track. When China stood aloof from Kim prior to 2018, agreeing to stricter Security Council sanctions after expanding trade, Russia navigated a tricky course of reluctantly going along with the sanctions while striving to boost ties with Kim. Pyongyang's leverage is too minuscule for it to be the pivot in a triangle, even if it can veer toward Moscow when dissatisfied with Beijing. If this is a Sino-Russian marriage, it has the distinct feature of Chinese dominance and reluctance by both to do great harm to North Korea because it is the chosen partner in their triangles with both the United States and South Korea.

For the sake of the balance of power versus the United States, leverage in undercutting South Korea as a US ally and an independent regional force, and the legacy of socialist national identity, both China and Russia offered support to North Korea. Given the North's obstinacy about cooperation and minimal reform, this support was mostly about regime maintenance, not economic rebuilding. Coordination between Moscow and Beijing was substantial by the 2010s on the big picture at the UN and in international relations, but it was not so great in year-to-year dynamics. When China took offense in the mid-2010s, Russia cozied up to North Korea, even if it had little to offer. Any thought of playing the pivot in this triangle, as it had done prior to the 1990s, was dashed by the reality of joint use by the two powers of the North versus the United States. Still, Pyongyang was the beneficiary of their readiness to relegate denuclearization to a secondary objective and to put the onus on Washington and Seoul for the failure of talks and the many troubles North Korea faced.

Kim opted to kill the official closest to China and forego a visit there until a diplomatic surge in 2018. He gave some encouragement to Russia but decided not to attend its 2015 parade marking the 60th anniversary of victory in World War II. Thus, Pyongyang put triangular diplomacy on hold after his father, Kim Jong-il, had renewed it, most importantly in meetings with Chinese officials that boosted economic relations and reaffirmed that China would not support sanctions of a crippling nature or prioritization on denuclearization. Instead of coordinating with China, Kim Jong-un opted to rush forward with nuclear and missile tests opposed by China and bound to aggravate relations with the United States. By the end of 2017, Trump was threatening some sort of preemptive attack, and China joined in tough new sanctions at the Security Council, as Russia reluctantly went along. The Sino-Russian-DPRK triangle left the DPRK as a pariah, but this impression proved misleading. By 2019, China had reaffirmed its centrality, and Russia was successful in hosting Kim in Vladivostok as a signal it must not be ignored in the maneuvering.

Events in 2018–19, prior to the pandemic-induced hiatus of 2020–21, clarified the essence of the Sino-Russian-North Korea triangle. China and Russia blamed

the United States for not cutting a deal at the February 2019 Hanoi Summit. They called for sanctions relief. Meanwhile, they waited for Kim to open borders nearly sealed by his lockdown over COVID-19, supported regime survival to an extent, and urged Kim not to conduct new tests that would add to instability. Both were playing a long game, aware that US-DPRK relations were paramount for Kim and dismissive of Seoul. By 2022, Kim had abandoned hope in a deal with the United States, Sino-US relations had sharply deteriorated, and Russian aggression had set the world on edge. In these tense conditions, this triangle was poised to strengthen—more in the open than ever before.

There has been much talk of pendulum swings as North Korean diplomacy twists from cold to hot, posing the globe's foremost danger of nuclear war or becoming the premier case of a great power search for lasting peace and stability. Beijing and Moscow have insisted that they know the answer, blaming Washington for an erroneous approach intent on regime change and Seoul for misjudgments that collapse was near. Disagreeing with analogies about the collapse of East Germany and of other socialist states, they largely insist that North Korea's theocratic system is durable due to the unchallenged position of the leader, the stability of the hereditary aristocracy in elite positions, and the devotion of the masses quarantined from external influences even as they become aware of more outside information. South Korea may appear to offer an alternative national home, but, more importantly, it represents an existential threat to those who have much to lose in a system that would relegate them to the margins and a national identity threat, given how much the identities of the North and South have diverged and even come into total conflict.

While Pyongyang picks its timing carefully to shift into the diplomatic mode, activating Chinese and Russian diplomacy as well, this has not posed much of a test to the triangular framework. A pattern of steadfast prioritization of stability (not pressuring the North in a manner that endangers the regime) over denuclearization can be discerned. Pyongyang is not blamed for the absence of diplomacy and only rebuked in a limited way for its violations of UN sanction resolutions through a stock response that they would cease if Washington went back to the negotiating table. When talks begin, Chinese and Russians call for stage-by-stage mutual concessions, putting denuclearization off until a final stage when not only Pyongyang is satisfied with the carrots offered to it but also Beijing and Moscow are convinced that the geopolitical outcome for the region meets their national interests and the geo-cultural outcome for North Korea is beneficial to their own national identity aspirations. Thus, the gaps within the triangle have not fluctuated much despite the swings from tension to diplomacy.

Each turn to diplomacy is viewed as a win for North Korea, as well as for China and Russia. Now Washington can be pressed to accept the process sought, to more or less the same degree, by the three countries: to put aside any illusion of regime change or even maximum pressure rather than primary reliance on positive incentives and to recognize that to achieve denuclearization and lasting tension reduction, Washington must shift to regime reinforcement with bilateral and multilateral security guarantees and acceptance of a geopolitical framework for Northeast Asia at odds with US

policies. In this perspective, talks have begun because Beijing wields its influence to steer US-North Korean relations in a desired direction and Pyongyang gains confidence that its recent advances in nuclear and/or missile development put the US side on the defensive. In early 2018 when US thinking stressed the impact of unprecedented sanctions in forcing Pyongyang to the negotiating table, Chinese and Russians were prone to point to North Korean successes in 2017 in completing its nuclear weapons program and intercontinental ballistic missile development as the reason for a diplomatic offensive, which led Trump to blink in a game of nuclear chicken. In 2022, repeated North Korean missile tests foreshadowed further testing of US resolve and a new South Korean president, with more Chinese and Russian backing.

### Strategic Threat

Chinese and Russians pose a dichotomy between two security environments associated with the Korean Peninsula: one dominated by US hostile intentions to the North in which the US-ROK alliance is complicit; the other marked by confidence-building measures between equals, where North Korea's security concerns are given equal weight to US concerns. The presence of dual threats lies at the heart of assumptions about how to proceed on the peninsula. This does not mean that Moscow and Beijing are of one mind regarding the security implications of possible force arrangements on the peninsula. Moscow has at times disagreed with Pyongyang about the need to remove US forces from South Korea. Beijing analysts have often voiced stronger calls for their removal. Pyongyang's position could vary depending on how talks with both Seoul and Washington proceed. Yet, all three parties to the socialist legacy triangle seek, at a minimum, a much-diminished US force presence and alliance as the pathway to reducing strategic threats.

Given the probability that Washington and Pyongyang will fail to reach an agreement on how to balance reduced sanctions and steps toward denuclearization, the response to the continued perceptions of strategic threat is likely to increase threat levels rather than lower them. North Korea gains little without provocations, and China and Russia are more inclined to take action against US and South Korean responses to them than to the North's behavior. Having rallied around Kim, they might not only boost economic ties but also join in some sort of security caldron. The line-up preceding the Korean War would be reconstituted if Seoul failed to find a way to bridge the differences or defy its ally. The danger of nuclear war or conflict that started between states capable of threatening each other with nuclear weapons would be at a peak. The tougher South Korean stance toward the North in 2022 gave more impetus to rising bipolarity.

Beijing and Moscow exaggerate the security threat from the US-ROK alliance and its defensive moves in response to Pyongyang. Washington and Seoul are alarmed by a growing threat with scant prospect of enlisting the support of Beijing and Moscow. Pyongyang sees no recourse but to increase its threat capacity, tempering its moves not to draw Beijing's ire, economic pressure, and willingness to tighten sanctions. Given these realities, security is driving China, Russia, and

North Korea closer, but with limits. Should an agreed security framework somehow emerge, the gap between Chinese and Russian thinking could be exposed. What Moscow desires strategically is not likely to coincide with Beijing's strategy, but North Korea is secondary, so it is likely to defer to Beijing. The triangle remains skewed strategically, as well as economically, to the Sino-North Korean side over the Russian-North Korean side, unless the North's fear of Sinocentrism as a security and economic agenda keeps it wary of allowing this triangle to coalesce fully.

### **Economic Vulnerability**

North Korea has suffered from Security Council sanctions that China and Russia approved after watering them down. Yet the willingness of its leadership to accept sacrifices reduces the effect of such pressure. China and Russia may pay a price in secondary sanctions imposed by the United States for violating UN sanctions and helping to sustain the North's military buildup, but this is minor compared to the sanctions they have endured for other transgressions. Given the extremely low levels of trade with North Korea, economic vulnerability has not been a big factor in the triangle.

North Korea leaves China and Russia possibly vulnerable to secondary US sanctions if they fail to reinforce Security Council sanctions. Of course, North Korea's weak economy does not put either country at risk of losses from any retaliation from that source for sanctions. Rather, North Korea is seen as an economic opportunity, either for Northeast China or for the Russian Far East. If China dominates the economic opening of the North, as it has in trade since the 1990s, Russia could find the Russian Far East cast aside. Although South Korea keeps agreeing to tantalizing three-way projects on a North-South corridor, it refuses to proceed due to sanctions against the North and could lose interest once it no longer sought Russia's help in corraling the North for talks. Russia's plans are more urgent and precarious, while China can bide its time, preparing to compete with South Korea if ever the floodgates are opened for integrating a weak economy.

Moscow and Beijing prefer to prop up North Korea's economy than to see it collapse. Reform limited to gradual acceptance of market forces and assistance from South Korea or the United States is sought, not wholesale opening to the outside. China offers entry into the BRI, while Russia promotes three-way infrastructure projects along a North-South axis, involving South Korea. Indeed, the much longer Sino-DPRK border and well-established east-west trade route through Sinuiju bolstered by planned special economic zones give China a huge advantage. Russia fears that this would lead to economic integration, marginalizing it. Neither China nor Russia would like North-South integration based on opening the demilitarization zone or with Japan providing massive economic assistance in lieu of reparations as a way to obtain a large cut of economic opening. Suspicion abounds on all sides, but, so far, a closed economy keeps every country out, except the trickle of Russian goods and the ups and downs of Chinese trade. The pandemic closed borders and reduced trade to North Korea to a trickle with no opening in sight.

## National Identity Incompatibility

Symbols of national identity abound in narratives regarding North Korea. For some, they are either about human rights abuses beyond parallel or reunification opportunities for a country unnaturally divided. For others, they range from “noninterference” in a country’s internal affairs to reviving traditional friendships sealed in blood. Beyond balance of power considerations and economic interests, identities drive narratives, as well as policy choices. By 2022, waning South Korean talk of reunification and growing Chinese and Russian talk of historic camaraderie and opposition to US “anti-communist mentality” reframed thinking.

During the three decades of the Sino-Soviet split, this was a complicated triangle, where elements of national identity played a critical role. Regardless of North Korean distrust, both Moscow and Beijing regarded it as a socialist ally, which needed support in the face of US support for South Korea. The Sino-Soviet split gave Pyongyang a chance to play one off against the other, as they strove to gain an edge for their claim to be the authentic home of socialism. Not dabbling with socialist reform, North Korea did not pose an ideological threat despite glaring idiosyncrasies. In the first decade of Deng’s reforms, Pyongyang leaned to the Soviets, but China made sure to continue its support without any sign of ideological criticism or approval of South Korea.

If Russia’s defection from communism and the Kim family’s embrace of dynastic rule suggested to many that the socialist factor was gone, a closer look at national identities gives us pause. They have different salience than in the era of traditional communism but still matter a lot. In an era of reviving ideological confrontation, driven, above all, by China and Russia’s assertion of national identity in opposition to the United States, the socialist legacy continues to affect foreign policy.

At present, the identity overlap of North Koreans with Chinese and Russians is low. As early as the 1950s, North Korean leaders made sure of that by twisting Marxism-Leninism to a cult of a demigod leader and keeping positive profiles of allies from the public. Cultural affinity stands no chance of bolstering the Sino-Russian-DPRK triangle. Neither Chinese nor Russians have drawn positive pictures of North Korea either, resting their case for support on negative views of the US approach to the North and on assumptions that North and South Korea share little that matters in common since national interests are sharply at odds and identities need not be mentioned. On all sides of the triangle, North Korea was not a subject of direct identity discussion. Public opinion expressed more openly in Russia and at rare moments of tolerance when relations had cooled in China doubted identity overlap. However, frankness about the horrors of life in North Korea and its system is missing in international relations writings and fails to shape policy decisions about bilateral relations, which purport to be based strictly on realist interests, as if the socialist legacy and historical memories do not count. But they increasingly do, even if the affinity is couched in narratives on historical bonds rather than any approbation of North Korea’s current way of life.

The history dimension, which is often a surrogate for the ideological dimension, looms large in the acknowledgment of special bonds with Pyongyang in

both Beijing and Moscow. Fighting in the Korean War is showcased as a defensive response to US aggressive behavior and intentions. Given the parallels to purported current US expansionism and regime overthrow ambitions, it is incumbent on China and Russia, each contends, to assist Pyongyang to keep Washington at bay. This is far from a commitment to support Kim's provocations or work to revitalize his economy. Rather, it means qualified support for reasons of identity, as well as those of security.

While South Koreans and North Koreans presume a closeness between the national identities of their two parts of a divided nation, there is reason to think they are deceiving themselves. Shared history before 1945 and a language heavily shared between the two deceptively suggest identity overlap to a large degree. Yet, a review of the various dimensions of identity leads to a different conclusion. Neither side is prepared to seriously compromise its own identity for the sake of unification or even in the process of working toward that end. Memories of the Korean War are held too closely in the North, westernization has reached too far into the South, and the gap has not been narrowed by contacts and information the way it was for East and West Germany in the 1970s and '80s. North Korean refugees in the South find it very difficult to live in such an alien environment. Indeed, adjustment to any environment where they are not on a leash from home for limited sojourning, as in Russia or China, is hard to envision in foreseeable circumstances.

Revival of the Cold War and ideological confrontation by 2022 breathed more life into identity narratives about North Korea. For China and Russia, that country had become a victim of rabid rhetoric in the United States, unjustified by security interests. The failed Hanoi Summit of 2019 is attributed to US psychology. For the United States, as well as Japan and increasing numbers in South Korea, North Korea represented a fanatical personality cult backed by Xi Jinping and Putin's increasingly extreme animosity toward the United States and its alliances. No case more fully encapsulated the contrast in thinking about the elements of national identity than North Korea.

### **Dynamics of the Socialist Legacy Triangle**

The China-Russia-North Korea triangle has strengthened over three decades in each of its legs. The two legs with North Korea remain atrophied on all dimensions, but security understandings have increased in case of a showdown, economic ties had haltingly expanded until the late 2017 sanctions and then the COVID-19 lockdown, and there is new recognition of shared socialist identity in Sino-DPRK relations. Sino-Russian tensions over North Korea remain largely below the surface, while both sides are tolerant of the North as long as it does not test nuclear weapons or long-range missiles. While patience is required until North Korea revives diplomacy, three-way ties stand poised to grow. Given hostility to the United States and the reassertion of identity themes, momentum is building for circling the wagons behind North Korea if it finally does its part or, in a more fraught atmosphere from 2022, even if it provokes a confrontation by itself.

Could South Korea serve as a buffer working with Russia or China to ease the security transition for North Korea and the outside world? Moon Jae-in went beyond prior presidents to present his country in this light. Yet, both Chinese and Russians did not take his overtures seriously. They see no basis for North-South common ground except in economic carrots as sanctions are being removed, no Korean consensus or official follow-up beyond lip service to proceed as Moon desired, no real respect for Russia, which is still perceived as the friend of the South's enemy. Proposed economic ties, such as in Moon's "nine bridges" to Russia, are words not matched by deeds by companies in South Korea, which try to shift the blame to the North and UN sanctions. Moscow and Beijing seek to use Pyongyang to transform Seoul, much less the other way around.

The Sino-Russian marriage has different meanings for the triangle with North Korea than the one with the United States. Elements of rivalry rise closer to the surface. Tensions cannot be totally avoided in dealing with North Korea. On security, they agree on keeping the United States out and denying South Korea its aspirations, but neither would be pleased if the other struck an exclusive alliance with Pyongyang. On economics, China has the upper hand in a balance that Russia must accept, but a sharp shift one way or the other is not desired by the side that would lose ground. Finally, on national identity, both oppose North Korea succumbing to South Korean thinking about unity or Koreanness and would be wary of a more assertive anti-foreign identity, but Russia would be troubled by a tilt toward China, as in Sinocentric deference reminiscent of the tributary era.

The Sino-Russian-DPRK triangle is a romantic triangle with a strong bond between two sides and weaker bonds with the third side. Chances are low that the third side, North Korea, would break away from either China or Russia, considering the less desirable alternatives. Tilting to Russia holds little promise, given the meager economic payoff and the high price for Russia of alienating China. Drawing closer to China has been anathema to North Korean leaders, fearing the security and identity consequences, but it is the most likely way this triangle will change. A less likely choice, if the North's nuclear weapons program were accepted in Seoul and later in Washington, would be a tilt away from China, casting doubt on the socialist legacy triangle. This raises fundamental challenges. Construction of a socialist legacy triangle holds greater promise.

If Russia has forsaken socialism and North Korea's familistic ideology is only remotely based on socialism, is this a revival of the socialist legacy triangle? For two decades, many argued that the reforms in China also spelled the death knell of socialism. Clearly, class struggle has disappeared from ideology. Yet, at least four elements of national identity give us reason to refer to a socialist legacy. One, all three celebrate the history of their country and censor criticism of its failings in the era when they were joined by socialism. Two, they laud also the "golden age" of relations from Korean War joint sacrifices for a righteous cause to Sino-Soviet cooperation of the 1950s and in the revolutionary struggles in China and Korea. Three, all three demonize the West and the United States in the past and today, much as they did in the age of denouncing imperialism—a core in the socialist worldview.

Finally, as China and Russia boost their relationship with prospects of reaching out to North Korea too, they are making progress in shifting from what was long seen as a pragmatic bond without ideology to an ideological bond in opposition to the US “Cold War” mentality. For now, their ideological bond remains weak, and it barely exists with North Korea. The direction of change is toward renewal of the socialist legacy, but it poses serious challenges.

North Korea defied bipolarity in the Cold War, often balancing China and the Soviet Union, not the United States. Sino-US bipolarity poses a different challenge since ties with the United States are doubtful, while Sino-Russian closeness reduces the chance of playing off one against the other. Staying aloof is not a pathway to economic resurgence. Counting on China to stave off collapse may continue at a rising cost of greater deference and acknowledgment of a shared socialist legacy. This may not be desired, but the alternatives pose greater peril for regime survival in the immediate future. A full-fledged Cold War increases the value of North Korea to China and Russia. It motivates them to work more closely together and to be more tolerant of North Korean behavior previously found worrisome. This triangle is growing closer together.

Given overlapping Chinese and Russian views of South Korea and its alliance with the United States, ahead is close coordination over North Korea. This is a “romance triangle” with uneasiness about the third party and whether the two can fully agree on it. Yet, there is no likelihood of a split in dealing with North Korea even if the other two may agree at times that they have to pressure it. Talk of China as the hub of the triangle may be premature in light of North Korea’s wariness.

# 4

## CHINA, NORTH KOREA, THE UNITED STATES

### The Shadow of the Cold War

Some have argued that the Cold War never ended in Northeast Asia because the North Korean threat was not resolved. The Korean War was the most direct and serious confrontation of the United States with China and the Soviet Union during the entire Cold War. After an agreement with China on countering the Soviet threat, there was never a Sino-US agreement on how to deal with North Korea. Russo-US understanding of North Korea lasted just a few years in the early 1990s. In the period from 1993 to 2018, there was no issue of greater strategic urgency in Sino-US relations than how to address North Korea's nuclear weapons program, although Taiwan looms as the greatest danger and by the late 2010s had become the focus of concern. Both sides registered disappointment at the other's North Korea moves, although they repeatedly negotiated about this and made agreements that led to Security Council resolutions and the Six-Party Talks.

Washington and Beijing found agreement on the desirability of denuclearization but rarely on its priority among other goals in responding to Pyongyang. They could join in appeals to start talks with Pyongyang without reaching a shared understanding of how those talks should proceed. If sanctions at the UN were approved through compromise to which other Permanent-5 (P5) Security Council member countries agreed, this only followed sharp disagreement and led to different attitudes about rescinding some of them or enforcing them. When Sino-US relations were on the upswing and North Korea was intensifying its provocative moves, a compromise might be reached between US maximum pressure demands and Chinese reluctance for further sanctions. In relatively positive times for these great powers—e.g., 2006–7—there was even optimism that they had settled on a lasting formula for cooperation on the North. This was an illusion, as seen in 2009–10 and 2019–21 when clashing approaches rose to the fore.

The Sino-US-North Korea triangle demonstrated the limits of Sino-US strategic understanding in all periods and the growing danger of its absence. If the US had

resorted to military force in 1994, as was contemplated, China would have responded without any likelihood of direct armed conflict. If it had happened in 2002–3 and Bush had not focused on a war in Iraq, China's response would likely have been more assertive. Finally, in 2017, when talk arose of a US preemptive strike, the danger of North Korea's threat not only leading to a cold war but even to a hot war including China could no longer be excluded. In the 2020s, it is difficult to foresee military action against North Korea for many reasons, one of which is China's forceful response.

The Donald Trump–Kim Jong-un “lovefest” of 2018–19 was a distraction, as was so much of Trump's rhetoric, from the ongoing trends in international relations. There was no foundation for the supposed deal the two leaders feigned to reach, as preparations were minimal for their two summits, and follow-up proved strikingly unproductive. Trump's rhetoric in 2017, raising the risk of war, shrouded in hyperbole what was, in fact, an accelerating showdown with no easy option for the US side. This was the reality that was obscured for a time. The biggest difference between the 2017 and 2019 situations was that a united front to exert maximum pressure had, at last, been generated in 2017, following a trend dating back to the final Barack Obama years, and it had collapsed in 2019, as Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin reacted to worsening relations with the United States by drawing closer to Kim in a sign that they anticipated a closer triangle versus the United States. Their moves were put on hold when the pandemic led to closed borders.

With North Korea hermetically sealed in fear of the pandemic, the situation in 2021 greeting the Biden administration was calmer than many had expected. Sino-US relations were at an impasse too, while some warm words between Beijing and Pyongyang suggested that they would, before long, resume the economic ties curtailed due to the pandemic. Triangular dynamics had changed in favor of tenser Sino-US relations and closer Sino-North Korean relations, with no likelihood of the third leg between Washington and Pyongyang escaping from recurrent bouts of atrophy. In early 2022, North Korea repeatedly fired off missiles, reminding everyone of its threat potential.

The state of Beijing and Washington's bilateral relations is well reflected in the degree of their cooperation on the North Korean issue. How Washington deals with Taiwan, trade tensions, and other vital PRC concerns is assumed to influence Beijing's cooperation on UN sanctions. How Beijing deals with sanctions, in turn, is perceived as affecting US management of other bilateral concerns. If each side professes to base its policy toward the North only on its national interests, inoculated from great power frictions, the trilateral context reveals that this is not so. Especially China takes into account US policies toward it, knowing it is not compromising its fundamental stance, only flexibly making diplomacy easier in awareness that the odds are stacked heavily against pressuring North Korea to back down. Interest in denuclearization holds regardless of tensions spiking with the United States, but Chinese cooperation with the United States and pressure on the North reflect other interests. China's calls for relaxing the sanctions hint at its inclination to circumvent them, depending on conditions as they evolve.

The China–North Korea–US triangle has been rife with charades. China feigns cooperation with the United States and expects behavioral modifications or restraint.

The United States exaggerates China's degree of support for denuclearization to suggest diplomacy is proceeding better than it really is, helpful for the presidential image. And North Korea pretends it is prepared to give up its programs but leaves vague its conditions for doing so in order to increase the chances of concessions to it. For 20 years, however, the basics should have been clear: China demands more from the United States and provides increasing support to the North within limits; the United States doubts China's intentions more than it acknowledges when diplomacy is underway; North Korea plays hard to get but leans toward China more than the United States. In the early 2020s, the North's tilt toward China is more apparent, but it is mainly aloof—suspicious of both sides of the triangle but quieter toward its benefactor China.

Into this triangular mix enters South Korea, beseeching the United States to follow its lead with the North and deferring to China to win its cooperation or, at least, to restrain it from using the North as a weapon against Seoul. This intermediary has influenced the ups and downs of diplomacy, but it has little impact on the fundamental triangular calculus. Pyongyang focuses on changing the US calculus; Beijing responds to US moves; Washington focuses on the threat from the North. Seoul desperately seeks to avoid both the breakdown of talks with Pyongyang and the downturn in Sino-US relations but appeals for “hail Mary” initiatives do not alter the ongoing trajectory. Yoon Suk-yeol's election in 2022 brought a leader most wary of dead-end diplomacy.

While North Korea is viewed as the wild card driving change on the peninsula and South Korea envisions itself as the force that should take charge, souring on China's role and often bristling at US insistence on bilateral decision-making over the threat, China uses the North or tantalizes the South for its own long-term strategy. It wields the economic and sanctions levers. It can pressure the North into talks or put it on notice if China is being bypassed. For Beijing, the “North Korean card” is one of its most effective instruments in the competition with the United States over the regional architecture of the Indo-Pacific and in the revival of Sinocentrism on the peninsula. In the 2020s, however, loss of hope for China's help altered both the United States' and the ROK's calculus.

## Tests of Triangularity over Three Decades

A weak China hesitant to challenge the United States on North Korea and facing the ire of the North for daring to normalize relations with South Korea was rather aloof in the 1990s, yielding finally to four-way talks that the United States and South Korea sought after the 1994 Agreed Framework. It did not take North Korea's side and did not provide adequate assistance to alleviate the mid-90s famine. At the end of the decade, with diplomacy invigorated by Seoul's Sunshine Policy and Washington seeking its help, Beijing grew more active—also recognizing a ROK-US divide from 2001 that it could exploit. Newly emboldened and fearful of a US preemptive strike on the North, China played an active role at the United States' urging in convening talks from 2003. Triangularity gained momentum through repeated consultations with both parties, as Tokyo and Moscow were kept in the loop and Seoul sought

a bigger role. Roh Moo-hyun pursued North Korea single-mindedly but failed to manage great power ties as the Six-Party Talks proceeded, straining relations with the United States. As the talks failed in 2008 and Pyongyang turned to provocations and aggression, Beijing revealed that rather than denuclearization, its priority was regime survival and a new peninsular security framework. It was less deferential to the United States, which was angered by a negative turn in triangularity.

From 2010 to 2017, Sino-US cooperation on North Korea was limited, with intermittent talks and compromises on UN sanctions, while what had been an upsurge in Sino-North Korean ties cooled with Kim Jong-un's accession to power. Yet China had boosted trade with North Korea, making it easier for the regime to find some level of economic stability. Washington continued trying to get Beijing's cooperation on tougher UN sanctions with greater success in late 2017.

Triangular flux resumed in 2017–19, propelled by Trump's personal activism and the arrival of a new progressive president, Moon Jae-in, in Seoul. Compared to Roh, Moon learned the lesson of coordination with Washington, but he was unable to manage ties with China, acting as if only the ROK-DPRK-US triangle mattered. He had the advantage of Trump's eagerness to take credit for even the symbols of a breakthrough and Kim's confidence that he had the threat potential to find a pathway to recognition as a nuclear weapons state. That opened the door to diplomacy in 2018, but Washington ultimately felt too threatened to cut a deal accepting a nuclear weapons state.

Moon was caught between Kim, whose fling with diplomacy might not last long, and Trump, whose intervention against the better judgment of the US expert community had limited staying power. Moon was tempted to reward Kim for taking the diplomatic track and stabilizing inter-Korean relations, but many, including US officials, saw that as the pathway to acceptance of North Korea as a "responsible" nuclear power with dangerous potential for further blackmail and nuclear proliferation. Kim saw in his success with Trump promise of the same result, also an ideal partner for North Korea's long-term strategy. Given Trump's hesitation to embrace Moon's approach from late 2018 after doing so in the spring and summer, Moon met with Kim seeking to strengthen his case to Trump that sanctions relief precedes threat reduction and tried to enlist the support of Xi and Putin for this sequence, which they obligingly offered. Allowing the status quo to drag on was seen by many as preferable to a return to the war scare of 2017—maybe even by Trump, who kept calling the results a great success despite no denuclearization. In this context, the US-ROK alliance was shakier than it had been in a long time because the two sides were pulling in different directions as top-down moves with short-term goals lacked a strategy.

Meanwhile, China's rise had altered its stance, making geopolitics more of a factor. It rejected a marginal role, getting Kim to make three quick summits with Xi to keep China in the diplomatic loop and presumably setting a different agenda for the US triangle. Brief activation of the ROK-DPRK-US triangle ended. The United States could not rely on Moon in North Korean talks; North Korea dismissed Moon as incapable of defying the United States; China favored a different diplomatic approach, putting it in the forefront should diplomatic talks be resumed.

Diplomacy in 2018 proceeded in the shadow of Sino–North Korean–US triangularity. There was much speculation over the extent to which Pyongyang was trying to use ties to one or the other of these great powers to influence its ties to the other. Its repeated backing away from meetings with the US side or refusing to make concessions that would have moved the talks forward led observers to speculate what was behind its moves. One view was that Pyongyang was watchful of events in the United States, waiting to see if Trump was just using this bilateral relationship and twists he gave to it for domestic political purposes or reacting to the rhetoric of US officials or perceived slights. Another view was that Kim was buying time to elicit a better offer from the Chinese, which could be used as a bargaining chip, especially as Sino–US relations deteriorated.

The Biden administration declared its intention to adhere to the Singapore summit declaration, as it supported Moon pursuing new talks with Kim and offering humanitarian assistance within the limits of UN sanctions. This fell far short of North Korean demands. The combination of the pandemic, sanctions, and poor weather left the North reeling, but it refused to return to talks.

Over three decades, Washington shifted under growing threat to more diplomatic flexibility but far too little to satisfy Pyongyang. Beijing took an increasingly active role or resented when it was marginalized, but it disappointed one side by agreeing, in stages, to more sanctions, and the other by increasing trade and limiting pressure, seen by the United States as reducing the North’s willingness to denuclearize. Of the three states in this triangle, the North was the driving force by undertaking provocations, deciding when diplomacy was timely, and cutting off diplomacy too. Beijing was a driving force too, choosing when to press Pyongyang to turn to diplomacy either by increased sticks or by increased carrots, which doubled as ways to boost this bilateral leg.

China controls the economic spigot and increasingly openly endorses the stance that the United States must first remove its “hostile policies” toward the North. The impasse had worsened, and China proved unable to drive a wedge between allies, utilizing North Korea’s rapidly expanding military arsenal as a dagger pointed at South Korea, Japan, and also the United States.

## Strategic Threat

During the Cold War, Pyongyang and Washington were bitter adversaries, never reducing their mutual antagonism. Washington at times preferred to ignore its enemy, but Pyongyang offered periodic reminders by belligerent behavior. They resumed after the Cold War, as Pyongyang insisted it was responding to a severe security threat and that only by building its own threat to the United States could the security situation be resolved. More than any other triangle in this book, this triangle is driven by a bilateral security challenge (with Seoul caught in the cross-fire). Beijing feigns aloofness and priority for stability when it too views the United States as a security threat and appears disingenuous in downplaying any security threat from Pyongyang.

At the forefront in the China-DPRK-US triangle were clashing perceptions of strategic threat. South Korea's threat perceptions also mattered as it tried to influence both US policy and the North Korean willingness to negotiate. As early as 1993, along with anger over North Korea's nuclear breakout in defiance of promises just two years earlier, there was worry that the United States would launch a pre-emptive attack, reverberating in a North Korean assault on the South.

For Seoul, there was a dual threat under Trump: the North's threat had transformed into one against the US mainland, worsening the direct threat to the South by lessening the chance that extended deterrence would work, and the US threat of unleashing a war had again materialized with Trump's 2017 "bloody nose" rhetoric about a preventative strike on the North. This latter prospect was the worst-case scenario; even as diplomacy proceeded in 2018–19, it loomed in the background, influencing Moon to keep diplomacy going by putting the best face on Kim's alleged commitment to denuclearization despite slow responses as if Kim just needed time and encouragement. For Pyongyang, the message was that it was under a nuclear threat, which had to end to ensure regime and national survival. Denuclearization of the entire peninsula was essential, leaving open that this applied to US forces not only departing South Korea but also from Japan and calling into question the entire US nuclear posture in the region. Beijing had no reason to object to such pressure against its main adversary, agreeing on the aims of a US retreat.

Kim sought a deal with Trump, who would declare victory and, at least, reduce US forces in the South in ways that would be viewed in Seoul. For Washington, the threat to the US mainland came largely from the North's intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). If a deal could eliminate them, even if the North held on to some nuclear weapons, US security would be improved no matter how the US alliances would be damaged. Of course, the US call for complete, verifiable denuclearization raised the bar much higher. The challenge of reconciling differing threat perceptions greatly complicated diplomacy from 2018. In China, these perceptions were all downplayed with charges that North Korea would drop its belligerence if it felt secure and that the United States was using a putative threat in order to contain China.

When in 2016 Seoul deployed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system at the United States' urging, Beijing claimed that this posed a severe security threat and imposed unofficial sanctions. Defensive responses to the North Korean threat elicited Chinese understanding for the North's position that this was a response to the threat from the United States and the US-ROK alliance. Washington had hoped in the Six-Party Talks and at other times to reach an understanding with Beijing on how to check the destabilizing behavior of Pyongyang, as if regional stability were the objective. In contrast, Beijing strove to weaken the US-ROK alliance as if it were a danger to stability, insisting that Seoul's foreign policy be balanced between China and the United States while apparently seeking a more Sinocentric region of the entire Korean Peninsula as an outcome of North Korean diplomacy.

Security mattered much more than economics in this triangle. All sides claimed to be driven by threats or potential threats. Since China minimized the threat from

North Korea to itself and the North said little about a threat from China while exaggerating the threat from the United States and its military exercises with South Korea, the Sino-North Korean leg at least appeared much closer. With a Cold War atmosphere taking shape in the early 2020s, this leg tightened further. In the background, however, was an image of North Korean concern about a future Chinese threat.

## Economic Vulnerability

North Korea is almost entirely dependent on China for foreign trade, receiving critical oil deliveries and food assistance, as well as basic consumer goods, but it is also reluctant to proceed with economic projects that could threaten its extraordinary level of autonomy or open itself to outside influences penetrating a virtually closed society. Special economic zones were planned but did not materialize. Repeated Chinese proposals for openings and reform, coupled with show tours of model projects have failed to elicit change. Fear of economic vulnerability and what that would entail for social and political stability remain palpable. In 2020–21, fear of COVID-19 overwhelming a decrepit health system led to much greater closure of North Korea's economy.

The economic factor matters a lot given North Korean anxieties. It foresees a downward slope of economic openness, social unrest, and political turmoil. South Korean interest in economic ties is especially worrisome because of the undoubted appeal of its economic model and the resultant social interaction. China has been more respectful of the limits imposed by Pyongyang, keeping the spillover effects controlled. Yet South Korean culture seeps across the border from China. In this context, anxiety about economic dependency is so palpable it distorts triangular dynamics. Trump's attempt to woo Kim with visions of Trump-style resorts to attract foreigners failed to recognize the economic anxieties underpinning North Korea's refusal to open the nation's doors.

As long as North Korea fears both opening further to China and opening to South Korea (the United States has no plans to make overtures), the Sino-US-North Korean triangle will have limited economic maneuvering. Yet as North Korea tests the waters of expanded trade, the economic dimension is prone to tilt it much further to China. This is the lever to transform the triangle into a marriage of two states with security and national identity ties more favorable than their ties to the United States. Their economic ties are capable of expanding rapidly, solidifying the relationship, but China is holding back too, due not only to sanctions but also to Sinocentric expectations that are alarming to North Korea. So far, isolation is the preferred approach.

Fear of economic vulnerability is greatest in this triangle because of North Korea's outlook on how reform and opening, such as China undertook in 1978, is a recipe for disaster. Sino-US mutual fears of economic leverage being used unduly in their bilateral relationship matters too. China would not welcome US-DPRK economic ties that would give the United States great leverage and bring the North closer to the US-led community and South Korea. The United States—more than

South Korea—could countenance China’s economic leverage over North Korea if that reduced the security threat. So far, the economic conundrum remains unresolved along with security issues.

### **National Identity Incompatibility**

Symbols of a Sino–DPRK identity gap are concealed, although it is assumed that concern about Sinocentrism is deeply rooted in Pyongyang, and this identity obstacle is troubling Beijing. The symbols of the US identity threat for China to North Korea are conspicuous: a “color revolution” involving values for “regime change” amid labels such as “evil empire.” If the United States was slow to perceive China’s support for North Korea as a matter of identity as opposed to national interest, this was changing. The notion of a “socialist bloc” is drawing attention. China could not forsake its ally for reasons of historical identity.

From all three sides, incompatible national identities posed a tremendous barrier to resolving the dilemma over North Korea. The US side had a visceral opinion of the old North Korea, an “evil” state, totally untrustworthy even when it agrees to some offer, and incorrigible due to the very nature of the regime. It was not a partner but a trickster calling on you to “sale the same horse” for the umpteenth time. There was no reason to conjure up a new North Korea—its totalitarian nature and human rights abominations remained the same. The North Koreans saw South Korea as a continuation of the evil Japanese rule with collaborators in charge and the embrace of the United States as a betrayal of the true Korean national identity, as well as the cause of national liberation from colonialism. By extension, the United States was demonized as the backer of this regime and also of Japan, which had failed to redeem itself. The United States loomed as the perpetrator of the decimation of the Korean War and the evil force preventing the unification of the Korean people. China held a dual image of North Korea: tributary state beholden for its civilization and protection, and partner in revolution and socialism, which still shared the cause for which the two had joined and fought.

The US and ROK national identity gaps with North Korea diverged sharply when progressives were on top in Seoul, guided by a spirit of building trust, generously giving benefits through economic engagement while narrowing what was assumed to be an artificial identity gap by avoiding criticism, including discussion of human rights. The United States saw no prospect of narrowing the gap in this fashion, seeking, almost beyond hope, a turnabout of unprecedented proportions due to reaching an economic dead end or, more likely, regime collapse. Yet, the Korean public was largely skeptical of progressive optimism and had a view of North Korean national identity more akin to the US one, even if a reduction of tensions was welcome if at no cost to security.

Influencing the Sino–US–DPRK triangle is the struggle in South Korea between nation and alliance. Seoul seeks reunification, fulfilling the unfinished mission since 1945 of making the Korean people whole, but it has become wedded to the United States for values and security. The Kim dynastic leadership seeks reunification as

well, fulfilling a mission of liberation imbued with confidence that only they represent the true identity of the nation in the face of predator nations and collaborators in the South. Washington supports reunification on the condition that it strengthens the liberal, international order and serves the lasting cause of peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Beijing feigns support for reunification, but it is loath to accept either Seoul's or Washington's identity designs for it, nor could it tolerate Pyongyang's utterly xenophobic aims. In the early 2020s, the Sino-ROK gap widened and the ROK-US identity gap further narrowed.

As for the triangle with China, the identity factor looms much higher than it did prior to 2010. In the increasingly ideological standoff between China and the United States—over human rights, democracy, and deep historical divisions—North Korea serves as a partner with no such division, as far as the Chinese see it. Whereas the North may think differently, the US identity gap is far greater. If Sinocentrism once overshadowed some other concerns, the triangle has been evolving in China's direction—more rapidly since the failure of the 2019 Hanoi Summit.

### **Dynamics of the Shadow of the Cold War Triangle**

China has operated as the pivot of this triangle, having better relations with North Korea and the United States than they have with each other. When the United States has sought talks with the North—until 2018—it pleaded with China to appeal to the North or apply pressure in order to launch them. When two-way talks were not desired or fruitless, the United States turned to China to organize multilateral talks. This dynamic changed in 2018 because South Korea was eager to serve as a go-between, and the North opted to use its services, aware too that Trump's idiosyncratic style created the possibility of a summit with unpredictable effects. China was not pleased to be bypassed, but Kim made repeated visits there in 2018–19, which made clear that the Sino-North Korean-US triangle still operated. Indeed, Kim's brusque treatment of Moon clearly demonstrated that he would not countenance a triangle with South Korea and the United States except as a starting point for US diplomacy.

North Korea is accustomed to taking the pivot in foreign relations, having played that role with the Soviet Union and China for decades. The United States offers too little for this to work, and China is ready to apply too much pressure to prevent it. The result is a marriage, however troubled, between China and the North and China remaining in the pivot. It decides how much to reward or punish its ally and how open or closed it is to the United States' calls for more pressure. This is not the ideal triangle for China, but it is consistent with the logic of bringing a wayward partner back into the fold in Sinocentric regionalism, security stabilization, and shared socialist national identity. So far, Pyongyang defies Chinese aspirations, preventing consolidation of the socialist legacy bloc. Even so, its aggressive approach renews the shadow of the Cold War, while putting pressure on both the United States and South Korea.

Holding the pivot in a troubled triangle is far preferable to Beijing than Seoul gaining the pivot in a South Korea-North Korea-US triangle or in a South Korea-North Korea-China triangle. Even the prospect of North Korea attaining the pivot with

China and South Korea vying for its favor is not at all desired. Sinocentrism leaves no room for yielding so much ground to the North or to the rise of shared Korean identity. The status quo is unsustainable, and China anticipates that this triangle with North Korea and the United States will tilt further in its direction, however patiently it must wait. It can loosen or tighten controls on the North and be seen as the pivot.

What was once optimistically viewed as the triangle that would remove all traces of the Cold War in Asia, then viewed apprehensively as a challenging test for avoiding a new cold war, is viewed in the early 2020s as proof that the new cold war has begun. There is no reconciling the Chinese and US positions on North Korea. Although the North welcomes triangular maneuvering as a way to win concessions from both sides, it knows that China is much more supportive and has reason to make use of China's softer line in order to increase pressure on the US as tensions rise further. In the coming decade, it is hard to imagine that the US-DPRK leg of the triangle will improve, it is possible that the status quo will persist with a key but wobbly Sino-DPRK leg, and it is easiest to anticipate that the Sino-DPRK will strengthen as the Sino-US leg is mired in Cold War tensions. The Ukraine war in 2022 had the potential to accelerate Sino-DPRK relations, as it was deepening ROK-US ties, but China had little to gain from this partner, except as a dagger against South Korea and the United States.

The Sino-North Korean marriage is rockier than the Sino-Russian marriage. The United States appears to have more room to maneuver. Yet, it is no less a pariah. Both sides demonize the US and demand its retreat from South Korea. The return of the Cold War in Asia puts this triangle back in the forefront, as at the time of the Korean War.

## **PART II**

# South Korea as the Pivot of Transformation



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# 5

## SOUTH KOREA, CHINA, THE UNITED STATES

### The Pivot of Regional Transformation

In Part I, China was the driving force, steering Russia back to a grand strategic triangle, aiming to establish a “socialist legacy” bloc, and playing on US-North Korean divisions to revive Cold War battle lines conducive to China’s ambitions to split US alliances and drive the United States out of the Korean Peninsula. The focus turns to South Korea in Part II, recognizing its role in triangular contexts involving China, the United States, and Japan. First up is its triangle with China and the United States, where their rivalry over the future regional alignment has become most intense. With North Korea hostile toward South Korea and the United States, Sino-US relations worsening even more in 2022, some level of strategic economic decoupling between South Korea and China, and the return of a conservative president, the triangle tilted more toward ROK-US ties.

The ROK-China-US triangle stands as the principal test of regional transformation across the Indo-Pacific. China (and Russia too) strives to turn South Korea away from the United States, treating it as the weak link in the US alliance system in Asia. The United States (and Japan as well) seeks to reinforce South Korea’s role in the US camp, reckoning that it should endorse a US-led multilateral framework in the new context of the 2020s. Seoul long has wavered, beefing up the bilateral alliance but not committing to regional alliance aspirations while at times going so far as to reassure Beijing of its reluctance to choose sides. Such hedging grows increasingly untenable as the Sino-US rivalry deepens further and both sides raise the pressure on Seoul.

In 2016, US pressure to deploy THAAD ended with harsh sanctions by China on South Korea. In 2021, Seoul’s agreement to a bilateral communique identifying US regional priorities aroused Beijing further, visible in repeated hints by Chinese authors of possible punishments. If the United States is cautious about pressing South Korea to choose sides, China shows new signs of losing patience, warning about alliance strengthening, anti-Chinese public opinion, and a multitude of red lines that Seoul must never cross if it hopes to avoid unprecedented retaliation. South Korea’s moves could alienate either of the powers, and China was the one being alienated.

Seoul is a vital US ally—the “lynchpin” in Asia. It is also the prime target for China’s efforts to drive a wedge between the United States and its allies and partners in Asia. Navigating between the two has been viewed in Seoul as ideal for managing North Korea, boosting its economy, and putting itself in a pivotal position to reshape the architecture of Northeast Asia. How Seoul fares in this tricky endeavor is of decisive importance in the competition for regional leadership. In this way, the South Korea–China–US triangle serves as the testing ground for future tugs-of-war.

Seoul serves as a test case owing to its own security, economic, and identity agenda and owing to China’s security, economic, and identity designs on it. For Washington, the loss of South Korea would deal a serious blow to security, economic, and identity priorities as well. Thus, all of the dimensions under consideration here figure importantly in the ongoing triangular maneuvering.

Three variables impact the dynamics of this triangle: South Korea’s priority for reunification, leading to dependence on China, which is reinforced by rising economic vulnerability; China’s confidence that it can pressure South Korea, given its economic clout and ties to the North; and the state of Sino-US relations, which affect China’s policies toward both North and South Korea. The balance of these factors has varied over time and depending on which party was ruling in Seoul. Yet rising Chinese confidence and failing Sino-US relations raised the pressure on Seoul.

The shadow of North Korea looms large over this triangle. Seoul’s quest for reunification and its fear of military provocations led it to depend on both Beijing and Washington. The North Korea factor has made it reluctant to join US moves to oppose China’s aggression, but its suspicions of Beijing’s role have risen. China has been an indispensable partner in promoting diplomacy, also a worrisome influence in discouraging reunification, and a serious rival in competition over the economic integration of North Korea with the outside world. Seoul strives to transform North Korea on a path toward reunification, but it cannot avoid taking Beijing’s position into account while coordinating with its lone ally. Given this obsession with Pyongyang despite the persistent difficulty in maintaining direct contacts, the triangle with Beijing draws even greater attention.

Apart from North Korea, South Koreans worry about a revival of Sinocentrism, memories of which are deeply imprinted in their historical consciousness. As the first targets of China’s “wolf warrior” diplomacy and rhetoric, they well understand how Beijing can throw its weight around.

“Wolf warrior” language is characterized as arrogant, disparaging, and threatening. It castigates attitudes expressed about China’s foreign or domestic policies, attributes such impudence to deep-seated features of the other side, and warns of the consequences of actions that double down on such behavior. In the background is an explicit or implicit paradigm of proper conduct required of an offending state, but demands are specific to each targeted case. They are greater for South Korea, given Chinese assumptions about history, geography, and civilizational status.

Although the onset of “wolf warrior” diplomacy is usually dated from 2018, a case can be made that Xi Jinping’s response to South Korea’s decision to deploy THAAD was the actual starting point. What was presented as a security imperative was, in fact,

bullying to teach a defiant state a lesson. The traditional tributary relationship, the relative power differential, and the premise that Korea belongs in China's civilizational sphere all are plainly in evidence. Thus, history and culture figure prominently in coverage of the South and its betrayal in becoming "part of the West." Indeed, rhetoric toward South Korea well before 2016 showed signs of an early version of this. If the harshest Chinese rhetoric was toned down for a time, it was resuming in 2022.

An implicit and increasingly explicit comparison with North Korea is, at times, present. While the North has kept its distance from China, its role in the Korean War and its rejection of the West give it a degree of legitimacy not attributed to the South. The standards applied to the two US allies in Northeast Asia also differ. China cuts Japan greater slack, expecting from Seoul a different degree of deference. Sometimes this is linked to expectations for bilateral Sino-ROK ties which Seoul has repeatedly resisted and on which it is seen as backtracking. There is a deep force embedded in Chinese presumptions about how any Korean state must behave toward its bigger neighbor. After all, China considers itself the source of Korean civilization, the benefactor that assured it peace and stability, and, at times, the defender of Korean autonomy against Japan.

The United States regards South Korea as a democracy, which it saved from the scourge of North Korean rule and continues to defend with a large force and its nuclear umbrella. With the threat of China growing, both regionally and in support of North Korea, the United States seeks a fuller commitment from Seoul to its regional strategy. It understands prioritizing North Korea's threat and also has tried to enlist China in that endeavor, but it draws starker lessons from failures to win cooperation. Washington has generally been patient, content that the alliance stays strong. It pressed harder under Joe Biden, but key was Seoul's anger at Beijing's attitude.

The South Korea-China-US triangle is a classic case of two competing powers eying a third state that prefers not to side fully with one or the other camp. It continues to lean to the US side, given their vital alliance on the security dimension, fear of China tightening the screws of vulnerability on the economic dimension, and shared values with the United States, making national identities relatively compatible. As the two powers, reminiscent of the Cold War, increasingly press countries to join their side—on security challenges such as North Korea, the South China Sea, and Taiwan, on decoupling in high technology and the securing of supply chains, and on expressions of support on human rights and other values issues—South Korea demonstrates how this struggle plays out. This can best be understood by tracing the development of triangularity over three decades and then separately examining the three dimensions that expose how its dynamics were unfolding.

### **Tests of Triangularity over Three Decades**

After Sino-ROK normalization in 1992, the United States and South Korea largely agreed on China policy. They welcomed China's growing market economy, encouraged China to steer North Korea to the negotiating table, and encouraged values

conducive to China joining the liberal, international community. Yet Seoul stayed silent on sensitive issues that arose between Washington and Beijing, justifiably claiming that its ties were too fragile and the North Korea issue required greater caution. If at times it muddled values and concerns by aligning with Beijing against Tokyo, as if historical memory took precedence, this was not treated as an indicator of tilting toward Beijing, triangularity was rarely considered as three bilateral relations kept evolving. Even in 1998–2000, Kim Dae-jung's pursuit of Beijing and Washington to support his Sunshine Policy toward Pyongyang was perceived as reinforcing the US effort toward the North and overcoming China's aloofness on this challenge.

The dynamics of this triangle changed abruptly in the following decade. Opposed to Clinton's embrace of the Sunshine Policy and later aware of how North Korea was still pursuing nuclear weapons, Bush broke sharply with Kim Dae-jung and found his relationship with the following progressive president of South Korea, Roh Moo-hyun, difficult. Roh's pursuit of a balancer role in Northeast Asia and of economic ties with the North at odds with US strategy riled relations. At the same time, national identity tensions rose to the forefront in Sino-ROK relations, provoked by China's "usurpation" of the founding Koguryo dynasty in Korean history and subsequently a "culture wars" between angry netizens in the two countries, given overlapping claims to the same symbols such as the "dragon boat festival." Raw emotions about the past could not be concealed.

Sino-US relations were rockier in the 2000s as well, putting this triangle into play since Roh was testing relations with both powers. In managing North Korea, as well as regional issues such as Taiwan, Beijing and Washington struggled to find common ground. As China shifted to a more aggressive course in 2008, reaching agreement grew harder. Seizing the opportunity, North Korea broke away from the Six-Party framework with new provocations. Roh's successor Lee Myung-bak responded to China's lack of concern by tilting strongly to the US side, angering Chinese officials at a time a grassroots "culture wars" were already taking place. At decade's end, North Korean provocations brought into the open the break from Chinese foreign policy before 2008, straining Sino-ROK relations and Sino-US relations as Barack Obama was taking office.

China's hostility to Lee and his embrace of the United States bolstered a ROK-US marriage versus China.

Neither Seoul nor Beijing was satisfied by the state of triangularity in the early 2010s. The dream of enlisting China to join in the quest for reunification stayed alive, reinforcing optimism about a booming economic relationship. With Park Geun-hye taking charge at about the same time as Xi took power in China and the untested Kim Jong-un inherited the top post in North Korea, Seoul decided to test triangularity again. Since Xi kept his distance from Kim Jong-un as he met with Park, South Korean hopes rose that it could win China's backing, as well as the trust of North Korea. In 2016–17, China's insistence that THAAD was aimed at it rather than at North Korea exposed the superficiality of Park's "honeymoon" with Xi. China's sanctions and "wolf warrior" rhetoric angered South Koreans, and Park then swung decisively toward the US side.

Although it took a long time for many South Koreans to grasp the reality, Beijing's sanctions over THAAD in 2016 revealed its motivations more clearly and exposed once again (1894, 1904, 1945, and 1950) the Korean Peninsula's situation as a battleground for the great powers. Rather than prioritizing problem-solving, Beijing was pursuing its own interest in geopolitical control and dominance in Northeast Asia in a perceived zero-sum rivalry with Washington. Since this regional rivalry extended to the East China and South China seas, Seoul was urged in strategic discussions to view China in a broader context and join forces with those trying to rein in its power projection. China could be better managed through regional coordination and defense of the liberal international order, Americans argued, but the prevailing response in Seoul was that talking about China behind its back would lead Beijing to stop obscuring its true intentions on the peninsula, irreversibly transforming the triangle with Pyongyang. The election of Moon Jae-in in 2017 put peninsular thinking even more on center stage, leading Moon to go to Beijing to put a floor on the downturn in relations. China again pressed the ROK to balance the triangle, as it left in place some of the THAAD sanctions and sought ways to drive a wedge between allies.

Beijing and Washington made rival appeals to Moon. Beijing reinforced Moon's thinking to put denuclearization on the back burner and press for a peace treaty, perhaps even going to the UN for support since the UN Command continued to operate, driving a sharp wedge between Seoul and its ally. Washington appealed for exploring new frontiers of cooperation such as artificial intelligence and drawing firm lines against sharing high-tech, dual-use technology with China. At the same time, in resisting a Sinocentric sphere and narrative, Seoul should support a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" with stress on the rule of law, freedom of navigation, uprooting corruption in foreign trade and investment, and human rights. While many in Seoul now agreed on the nature of China's rise—the public in 2016–17 had been disabused of fantasies dating from the early 1990s and had a low image of Xi—there was fear not only of a Chinese policy shift toward the North but also of the retribution China was ready to take on South Korea's economy.

As Moon sought to keep the focus on North Korea rather than Sino-US relations, he succeeded in drawing Donald Trump into talks with Kim Jong-un, but after the talks collapsed, he could not avoid the consequences of widening security, economic, and national identity divisions between the two powers. Under Joe Biden, this took on new urgency as the United States turned to coalition-building to convince states to face China as a group, something South Korea had eschewed. A progressive president obsessed with North Korea and aware that exports to China are three times the amount to the United States was naturally hesitant. Yet the public had soured on China since THAAD, and China had veered toward heavy-handed pressure. The Biden-Moon May 2021 summit tilted the triangle further in the direction of the United States. The United States gave Seoul what it wanted on North Korea policy, keeping alive faint hopes for resumed negotiations, and South Korea agreed to language that took into account the US regional agenda, even touching on Taiwan. Avoidance still prevailed, albeit with China angry over the recent tilt and the United States emboldened to expect stronger support. In 2022, the tilt widened further.

Alliance management had proved difficult. Not only had Seoul and Washington often been at odds over diplomacy with Pyongyang—especially when progressive presidents were in office—but differences over managing China’s aggressive moves rose to the forefront again in 2021. Some in Seoul fault Trump for the failure of the Hanoi Summit with Kim Jong-un after Moon had been pushing a compromise that went too far for Washington, and many find US pressure to endorse an Indo-Pacific strategy if not an explicit China strategy contrary to the pathway envisioned for resolving peninsular tensions. For national identity reasons, they put reunification first and call on Koreans to become the masters of their own fate. Given the fact that expectations for China have fallen sharply, the issue is no longer framed as taking sides in order to address North Korea but more as breaking some from the United States to reassert sovereignty. In the conservative camp, more defense autonomy is also sought but with less idealism about ties to North Korea and greater appreciation for keeping the ROK-US alliance as strong as possible. In 2022, a decisive shift to the ROK-US dyad altered the shape of the triangle.

### Strategic Threat

Triangularity is muddled by the presence of North Korea as a security threat to South Korea and increasingly the United States. As allies, South Korea and the United States do not regard each other as a security threat; they have operated through a joint command to counter the danger from the North. China and North Korea remain allies as well, although they have little mutual trust and disagree on the North’s nuclear weapons program, even leading China to vote in the Security Council to impose sanctions. As North Korea’s threat capacity has grown sharply over three decades, this has greatly impacted triangular dynamics, even as Sino-US divisions on each other’s security threat had also begun by the early 2010s to affect the triangle with South Korea.

If the use of force by China over Taiwan or in the South China Sea is perceived as a threat by the United States (and quietly by South Korea too), the question on the Korean Peninsula is whether China would intervene directly or indirectly should conflict break out there. Since China blames the United States for tensions there, seeks the removal of US forces from the South, and blocks “maximum pressure” on Pyongyang by watering down UN sanctions and relaxing enforcement as desired, it is assumed that China contributes to the security threat both of the others face. The security challenges across the Indo-Pacific are interconnected, as seen in China’s clear linkages.

China seized upon the South’s decision to deploy THAAD to insist that the security threat against it had grown, after a quarter century of downplaying any threat from South Korea despite complaining about the US-ROK alliance. While less notice is paid to mutual fears of Pyongyang and Beijing, the latter opposes the former’s nuclear weapons program as dangerous, and the former seeks to keep its distance from Beijing for strategic reasons. The immediacy of strategic concerns is high, even if Beijing feigns concern about THAAD and may base its reasoning on concern for interference with plans for Sinocentrism dominating Korea and excluding the United States.

Questions were being sharpened at the end of the 2010s. Would South Korea's progressive government determine that diplomacy with North Korea means that its threat is diminished? Would China's aggravated arms race with the United States lead it to value North Korea's growing capacity to threaten the US mainland and US bases in Asia, altering its assessment of the North's potential threat to China and regional security? Did signs of polarization or cold war between Washington and Beijing reshape China's approach to the two Koreas? Would North Korea's inability to reach an agreement with the United States lead it to intensify its threats, including to US allies, worsening the security atmosphere with South Korea first of all? The security environment was in flux with no prospect of smoothing the way to triangular trust.

Already there was alarm about a loss of the technological lead over China, and Korean companies were seeking to diversify their trade. Moon was seen as preferring to keep China at some distance, even with the idea of a three-way ROK-DPRK-US peace declaration. Yet, there was no appetite to directly challenge China, making indirect, generic talks on regional issues with the United States a more likely alternative. As Trump and Moon feigned cozy cooperation on North Korea, those worried that the alliance would be in jeopardy because it became narrowed to one issue called for fortifying the foundation of the alliance with more attention to the values-based nature of it, more cooperation on the maritime domain, and more solidarity in the face of United Front interference by China in the domestic affairs of other states. After Biden pressed Moon further to support the US regional agenda, Moon tilted in his language, arousing consternation in Beijing.

The external influence of the Biden administration in 2021 somewhat shifted triangular dynamics by pressing Moon to defy China on regional security. Although careful to avoid direct mention of China, the May joint statement conceded ROK cooperation with the US-led "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy viewed in China as containment and even made note of Taiwan. Moon soon took pains to reassure China that no policy shift had occurred. Clearly, China did not buy this argument. It was critical of the drift in US-ROK relations, apprehensive that it would go further, and even alarmist about the security environment it insisted had now turned against it.

Security polarization in the wake of war in 2022 left South Korea scant room to maneuver. China had so clearly echoed Russian wartime rhetoric with ramifications for belligerence by North Korea that Moon Jae-in endorsed US thinking. Yoon Suk-yeol campaigned on a sharper tilt away from China and toward the United States. A new North Korean crisis could test his resolve.

## **Economic Vulnerability**

In 2017, clear tests of economic vulnerability in this triangle garnered global attention. In one corner was China's imposition of draconian sanctions on North Korea in conformity with the UN Security Council sanctions it had approved. In a second corner was China's tacit sanctioning of South Korea for its deployment

of THAAD, unacknowledged but unmistakable, carving billions from the tourist revenues from Chinese visitors and the sales of Korean firms in China. As Moon came to power in Seoul, his progressive camp was searching for a pathway to reduce the virtually complete blockade the South had imposed on the North, surmising that building trust with economic interaction would be a more promising path to peace and reunification than the maximum pressure exerted by multilateral as well as the South's unilateral sanctions. All three dyads were about to experience a shift in thinking toward sanctions even as the ones on North Korea could not be openly lifted given the US veto at the Security Council. China accepted the "three noes" assurances of Moon (on further THAAD deployment, a trilateral alliance including Japan, and participation in the regional US missile defense system) in late 2017, cutting informal sanctions. In 2018, Sino-North Korean and North-South diplomacy showcased talk of new cross-border infrastructure, as China was relaxing enforcement of some sanctions. Amid this spectacle of imposing sanctions and talking of economic integration, awareness of vulnerability spiked.

Multiple lessons were drawn from the economic maneuvering. For Koreans in the South, there was the renewed wariness of both overdependency on tight Chinese economic ties, which had over three decades expanded from zero to one-quarter of all trade, more than doubling trade levels with either the United States or Japan, and being outflanked by China in North Korea once sanctions were eliminated or bypassed. Finally, China had found reinforcement of its view that making countries highly dependent on its trade could be effective in realizing its strategic aims.

China had hinted at times at using South Korea's economic dependency as a policy instrument, and dark clouds began to appear in the relationship, even in Park's first years. With THAAD sanctions, this became a stark reality. When warnings followed that much worse lies ahead if Seoul does not change course, a pervasive sense of economic vulnerability blanketed Seoul.

Under Biden, systematic attention was given to dual-use technologies, supply chains, and China's use of economic coercion. Economics stands at the forefront of a long-term strategy to limit the power of China to gain unfair advantage in a long-term competition, including coordination with Seoul limiting the leakage of high-tech exports with dual-use and dependence on China's 5G technology. Given China's record in wielding its economic clout, as through informal sanctions and pressure on foreign companies to hand over sensitive technology, this dimension is being showcased. For North Korea, there has long been a broad-based effort to deny it imports essential for its military programs, but smuggling continued. Biden was keen on redoubling such controls on the North.

Whereas economic security rose to the fore amid Sino-US tensions, it garnered unwavering attention in response to the Russian war in Ukraine. The US-led, full-court press led to a rupture in many ROK-Russian economic ties, but it had spill-over to ROK-Chinese economic ties since the price of economic dependency in a cold war environment had been brought home clearly. First, THAAD, then the Sino-US trade war, and finally the Ukraine war delivered this message.

## National Identity Incompatibility

Sino-ROK relations are steeped in national identity symbols rooted in history. The Chinese pose a dichotomy between a Sinocentric legacy and Westernization. They treat Korean civilization as an offshoot of their own, expecting South Korea to fall in line as part of a deferential, exclusive, hierarchical order. There is no room for “universal values” and democratic pride. In contrast, South Koreans recall a history of abridged sovereignty, the Korean War as the near obliteration by China of their way of life, and the benefits of belonging to the “West.” Even “Koreanness” is deemed in jeopardy from Chinese pressure against their sovereign rights and civilization.

Some have supposed that three overlaps in national identity would shape the bilateral relations in this triangle. South and North Korea would be driven by the powerful legacy of Korean identity, sharing in pride for symbols of premodern history and in resentment over the Japanese efforts to obliterate that pride and even that identity. China and North Korea would share their communist legacy, which was reinforced by the sacrifices both made fighting together in the Korean War. In the case of China and South Korea, there are two powerful commonalities: Confucianism, which bound them closely for most of a millennium, and resistance to Japan in the 1930s–40s, which left deep-seated memories invoked repeatedly by leadership in both countries since the 1990s. It turned out that some identities are stronger than others, favoring Sino-DPRK ties at the present.

China’s foreign policy acquired a more aggressive cast in 2008, at the same time as its view of South Korea turned more negative. Writings on the United States, Japan, and others shifted in this direction too, but there were exceptional features to the downturn toward South Korea. A list of keywords to describe them should include entitlement, resentment, ingratitude, culture wars, betrayal, peninsular transgressor, and regional disrupter. Whereas China was demonizing the United States in broad strokes and vilifying Japan with history in the forefront by the beginning of the 2010s, the nature of criticisms against South Korea was distinctively rooted in Sinocentrism. Compared to other targets, identity issues were more fully in the forefront for China to negative effect.

The legacy of both the tributary system and the Cold War uniquely undermined Sino-South Korean relations, negating signs of transformation over a quarter century as soon as a test arose beyond the capacity of normal diplomacy to handle. Chinese publications conveyed a morality tale, which put virtuous China at odds with those seeking to distance themselves from the China-led order. Based on premodern history, the Korean people should trust China with the regional order, upstart Korea betrayed that order and cannot be trusted to play a balancing role or manage North Korea, Chinese argue. This thinking is reinforced by “stereotyped” attitudes toward North Korea, underscored by distorted histories of the Korean War. The result is unrealistic expectations for Sino-South Korean relations.

Influencing Korean thinking about China is sensitivity to its past hierarchical nature—revived by growing asymmetry and China’s invocation of it—and the fact that both sides view North Korea as “little brother” and increasingly object to how

the other is dealing with it. Commemoration of the Korean War in 2010 renewed ideological gaps of the Cold War. The 20th anniversary of normalization in 2012 occurred under China's "darkening shadow." Public discord had widened. The rewriting of history by China was labeled by conservatives as "historical imperialism" amid charges that China is attempting to "steal" history, demeaning Korean tradition. Yet, for a spell, South Korea was hesitant to define China's behavior in any definitive way, while expecting in 2013 that Park's outreach would reduce strains. Her approach was more deferential to China, leading China to take a more positive attitude. The "culture wars" attenuated, China saw benefit in taking it easy on Seoul while pressuring Tokyo and even Pyongyang, and China hoped to widen the US-ROK gap. Yet, publications in China kept putting the onus on South Korea to meet demands with further deference. With THAAD, the identity gap widened abruptly: Chinese criticisms hardened, while South Koreans awakened to a strikingly more negative view of China.

A grave danger was perceived in the popularity and messages of Korean culture to Chinese audiences. After the dispute over Koguryo history, censorship intensified of Korean history dramas. With the "culture wars," Chinese were mobilized to view Korean culture as a threat not a source of commonality. And in 2016, sanctions eradicating the presence of cultural imports from South Korea became an obsession. Conflicting identities had undermined Park's effort to build trust, given fundamental differences, including over cultural issues stemming from history. Mutual hostile images stem from half a century of East-West confrontation on the peninsula and in Chinese thinking from the dynastic era and its glorification of the tributary state system.

The idealism and identity yearning of South Koreans have combined with the Sinocentrism and growing assertiveness of China as the US side has prioritized the security threat of North Korea without being able to solidify South Korea's position in a regional alliance network. The US hold on the South was deepened by a robust alliance steeled by war and cultural closeness, reinforced by elite educational linkages. In those respects, the post-Cold War three decades did nothing to loosen the integration of the two countries. On the economic dimension, however, China made inroads but—given the North Korean shadow—without much impacting alliance cohesion and elite orientation toward US educational choices. From 2016, China's sanctions and threats gave no opening to the progressives and drove public opinion to view it more negatively than Japan.

Xi has avoided drawing a clear identity distinction with North Korea, although one has been gathering momentum in public opinion. He clearly prefers not to be encumbered by views that either could be associated with Western criticisms of human rights or would make it harder to reconcile with the North. Chinese leaders had found it useful to demonize South Koreans for "cultural aggression" during the Lee Myong-bak period, and that was intensified in the downturn of 2016–17. Xi's Sinocentrism puts a higher burden on the South for deference and acceptance of the historical narrative about China's benevolence to Korea. During the period of presumed warmth between Xi and Park, pressure persisted on the South to draw closer on identity issues such as joint demonization of Japan and Korean acceptance of elements of the "China Dream." There is no reason to think that China will accommodate a truly shared identity.

Moon faced a more difficult identity challenge than the other two leaders. The progressive camp has driven the national identity narrative, pressing the divide against Japan, repudiating the spirit of the December 2015 agreement on “comfort women,” and appealing to Koreanness more in pursuit of reunification objectives. If it plays down the gap with China in order to work more closely together in dealing with the North and avoids criticism of North Korean human rights abuses, viewing these identity themes as counterproductive, public opinion is not so inclined.

Progressives risk being outflanked by the identity narrative of the conservatives—harsher on the North and more attentive to China’s challenge, especially after the Chinese pressure in 2016. To advance its identity appeals, the progressives must overcome the widespread identification with the West and its assertion of universal values and a mood of accommodation of Japan for reasons of security and US trust. They are left in an ambivalent position in playing on identity emotions.

## Dynamics of the South Korea-China-US Triangle

Seoul has sought to calm potential tensions between Beijing and Washington: to enlist them both in the task of managing Pyongyang’s transformation, including denuclearization, and to advance a regional framework for peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia to which both can subscribe. It has objected to how both sides describe the deteriorating regional environment, arguing that hope for reconciliation is in sight, especially for North Korea. By avoiding clearly taking sides on the most serious disputes between Washington and Beijing, it has tried to separate two legs of this triangle from the third, but the Sino-US leg’s spillover kept interfering with Seoul’s intentions.

While some South Korean leaders spoke of a balanced triangle or not being forced to choose sides, the reality has been that, despite rapidly increasing economic ties between China and South Korea, the two legs of the triangle are highly unequal. For the purpose of enlisting the support of China with North Korea, Seoul has pretended that ties are much closer than they really are. China has also found it advantageous to claim that it has been given assurances of balance in the triangle as if steps in the US direction are contrary to past promises. When in late 2017 Moon agreed to demands for the “three noes,” this confirmed its argument that China wields a veto, and Seoul understands that it cannot tilt further to the United States. This compounded misleading assumptions about the triangle. On all dimensions, including fears of economic vulnerability, a close alliance bond contrasts with a resentful response to China’s actions and its resort to threats.

On security, the ROK-US alliance remains strong, while Seoul fears China’s response if North Korea takes offensive action, China’s agenda for regional dominance, and China’s behavior in the South China Sea or East China Sea threatening to Seoul’s lifelines. This wariness is only intensifying on all fronts. On economics, China’s sanctions and pressure on large companies are driving Korean corporations to move their operations elsewhere, as vulnerability is recognized as never before. Finally, on identity, Korean public opinion has turned much more negative toward

China, both for bilateral reasons in response to “wolf warrior” rhetoric and for the preservation of a liberal, democratic order, which China’s behavior at home and abroad is seen as overturning.

As Sino-US relations stay stuck at the nadir reached by 2020 or deteriorate further, South Korea cannot help but swing further to the US side. China’s internal policies, support for North Korea, foreign policy in general, and efforts to force Seoul to back away from the United States are all driving Seoul closer to Washington. Domestic politics in South Korea, however, matter for this timeline. A conservative leader in 2022 promised a more decisive tilt toward the United States.

The swing country role of South Korea was premised on the expectation that there would be no new Cold War in Asia and that North Korea would prioritize steps toward reunification over threats of renewed war. Both proved mistaken. For South Koreans to acknowledge that the hopes nourished over three decades are without prospect will be challenging. US policy must make sure that the onus will be kept on both Pyongyang and Beijing for this disappointment. The US-ROK marriage has endured and is on track to strengthen.

# 6

## CHINA, SOUTH KOREA, JAPAN

### The Renewed Core Regional Triangle

More than any other grouping, the China-Japan-South Korea triangle tested the proposition that East Asia could forge a community, taking advantage of robust economic complementarity and shared cultural and language traditions. It was assumed in the 1990s correctly that these states would thrive from expanded trade and investment but incorrectly that their national identities would draw them closer and that no serious security problems would stand in their way. By the 2020s, economic ties had hit roadblocks, identity gaps had aroused sharp tensions, and security (with the United States involved too) was threatening to derail the substantial level of cooperation achieved.

All three states have a compelling need to prevent North Korea from destabilizing the region. Their written languages are heavily influenced by Chinese characters and compounds, and they relied heavily on Confucian teachings until at least the late nineteenth century. However their interest in “Asian values” has been expressed, each has at times boosted them in distinction from the individualism emanating from the West. From the 1990s, both Seoul and Tokyo recognized the continued opening and prosperity of the Chinese economy as vital to their further growth. On the surface, there were compelling reasons for a harmonious triangle to emerge, but all sides bear responsibility for a troubled triangle rife with distrust and bereft of optimism for a community. Most responsible is China, which repeatedly has stirred emotions against one or the other state.

The China-Japan-South Korea summit with its own secretariat was intended to boost this triangle with economics in the forefront and spillover to security and regional identity. It began in 2008 when Sino-Japanese relations were rather hopeful, as a new conservative president in Seoul was resetting ties to Tokyo and on the heels of a recovery in Sino-ROK relations after tensions arose over a national identity issue raised by Chinese questioning the Koreanness of the Koguryo state. It suffered a fitful history as each of the bilateral relations in turn sank to the point that planned

trilateral meetings had to be canceled. Optimism about establishing a triangular FTA was dashed, although the Regional Economic Cooperative Partnership inked in 2020 includes all of them. If there was no open critique, US relief was felt at times that triangular cohesion—seen to be a way of China gaining dominance—kept being scuttled. When attention during the 1990s centered on a narrow vision of community, steeped in Confucian history, this triangle drew the most scrutiny, but it has continued to have significance for economics, security, and the quest for some sort of regional identity that overcomes the identity gaps exposed in evolving bilateral ties.

Some improvements in Sino-Japanese and Sino-ROK ties by 2018 gave new life to this triangle. Xi Jinping resumed summits with Abe Shinzo, and he and Moon Jae-in reached a deal to halt the THAAD deployment. By the early 2020s, however, Japan-ROK relations were stuck in a rut, Sino-Japanese relations had deteriorated again, and South Korea was being tugged by the United States to join a regional agenda in conflict with China's demands. Confucianism, economics, and security failed to boost this triad. Cooperation on North Korea or with ASEAN at the center proved elusive. Hopes for regular three-way summits appeared overoptimistic when even normal bilateral summits were repeatedly delayed or canceled. Wariness prevailed on all three sides.

Seoul found itself mired in quarrels with its two great power neighbors. Rather than serving as a bridge to draw them closer and into a community, it drew the ire of both governments, coupled with intense social media scorn. The Chinese internet first around 2007 and then a decade later filled with attacks as part of a "culture war." Japanese bookstores stocked shelves filled with "hate Korea" literature. Korean public opinion was hostile toward Japan, often driving a bilateral downturn, and by 2021, it was more so to China, never recovering from the THAAD retaliation.

A number of questions undergirded thinking about this triangle as it evolved over three decades. Would Seoul be dwarfed by the two more substantial powers, which had a big head start in the 1970s and 1980s in forging bilateral relations and were not under the shadow of the dangerous Pyongyang? Would Beijing face joint pressure from the two democracies and US allies to adhere to high standards of economic transparency and marketization, as well as security cooperation? Would a shared sense of victimization by Japan to 1945 lead to Tokyo becoming the target of two neighbors whose national identities were steeped in blaming it? As this triangle lost some of its luster with the shift of attention in the 2000s to a broadened image of East Asia inclusive of Southeast Asia, punctuated by the emergence of ASEAN Plus Three based on ASEAN centrality, it stopped being the focus of discussions about the prospects of an exclusive Asian regionalism. It still, however, is the region's economic core and a vital arena for shaping East Asia's future.

In its descent from a prospective Japan-led community to a cauldron of tense interactions, this triangle epitomized the disconnect between economic interests and security and identity rancor. China's economy rose abruptly to dominate in GDP, but it still relied heavily on companies in Japan and South Korea, making China a vital part of their supply chains. US talk of decoupling in certain technologies and industries cast a dark shadow at the beginning of the 2020s. Economic

vulnerability had reached a point for Tokyo and especially Seoul that Beijing could make them pay a hefty price. Both had been shocked at times by the brutal extremism of trade wars caused by Beijing. Economic pressure lurked behind Chinese threats if relations turned more adverse.

Three outcomes for triangularity could be foreseen. Under US leadership, Tokyo and Seoul, at last, would forsake historical distrust and forge a marriage of democratic, US allies, joining in opposition to China's threatening ambitions. Alternatively, China's economic magnetism might prove so inescapable, perhaps accompanied by loss of confidence in a unilateralist, dysfunctional United States, that it would become the pivot for greater triangular integration. A third possibility is failure to heal the Japan-ROK split, compounded by Japan standing with the United States but with South Korea on the fence between the United States and China, with the latter gaining ground. The following analysis finds no sign of the second outcome and a faint chance for the third. China will be driving the other two closer. In 2022, Yoon Suk-yeol's election and China's support for Russian aggression gave new impetus to a degree of ROK-Japanese reconciliation.

### Tests of Triangularity over Three Decades

Each of the three countries, in turn, aspired to reshape this triangle. In the 1990s, it was Japan that felt emboldened. Its emperor went to China in 1992, and official statements on several occasions were aimed at putting the history issue behind them with South Korea. Japanese idealists held up a vision of community, embracing shared cultural histories, and conservatives renewed hopes for some sort of Asianism, reducing one-sided dependency on the United States. By the 2000s, it was Korean progressives who raised the banner of a triad—this time with Seoul in the pivot as a balancer. Simultaneously, Seoul could purge the Japanese remnants in its system, end deference to Japan by “playing the history card” unabashedly, forge a special relationship with Beijing as they tackled North Korea together and public opinion drew closer, and escape from an unequal embrace with Washington without undermining the alliance. If this delicate tightrope walk quickly floundered, it was echoed in policies to the mid-2010s. Over time, it became clear both that the driving force in the triangle was China and that the alliance triangle with the United States left little room for either Tokyo or Seoul to harbor illusions about finding balance from ties to China.

Aspirations to engage China for long-sought goals—Asianism, reunification, less dependence on the United States, or more self-confident national identity—fared poorly in the face of China's behavior.

Since Japan and South Korea interacted most frequently in the triangle with the United States—a virtual alliance framework—their bilateral dealings with China rarely stood out in triangularity. This reflected China's preference for swinging its weight—Japan's need to compensate for past aggression and South Korea's quest to gain leverage over North Korea—and the mutual distrust between the two US allies. Over time, the two became more dependent on China's goodwill, as the economic balance shifted sharply in China's direction. Beijing upped the pressure

on Seoul in 2004, 2009, 2016, among other times. It intensified pressure on Tokyo in 1997, 2011, and 2014, and at other times. Thus, it largely drove the dynamics of bilateral and trilateral relations.

South Korea became the swing country in this triad for at least three reasons: (1) North Korea, (2) animosity toward Japan enabling China, and (3) its progressives' worldview desperate for a sharp break from the past—unlike the fading aspirations of Japanese progressives, who lost any impact. Needing China for their pursuit of North Korea, South Koreans long were credulous of it beyond what was seen in Japan after the Tiananmen shock of 1989 and the “patriotic education” shock from China of the mid-90s. Fueled by anger over Japanese historical revisionism, Koreans even locked arms with China in “playing the history card” at times. South Korea allowed the leg with Japan to atrophy when it could have helped, along with the US alliance, to check China. If conservatives in Seoul could succumb to US pressure and geopolitical realities to cut a deal with Japan (as in 2015), following the lead of progressive Kim Dae-jung in 1998 desirous of support for his Sunshine Policy, Roh Moo-hyun in the 2000s and Moon from 2017 were driven to dispel the perceived Japanese imprint on their society, keeping quieter about China's behavior.

No other country is similarly in danger of flipping from US ally to neutrality or at least to the side of hedging against US policies. Yet, at each moment of peril for the ROK-US dyad, Seoul has pulled back. Similarly, at each period of greatest promise in Sino-ROK relations, the Chinese have offended Korean sensibilities, casting doubt on China's trustworthiness. This roller coaster of ups and downs in both dyads has not escaped from the shadow of Sino-US relations. Seoul has found maximum flexibility when tensions have dipped between the two. Under Donald Trump and Joe Biden, it is more constrained, not least because since 2016 Xi has kept applying strong pressure.

China's rapid rise as the leading power in the region altered the way this triangle was approached. During the period of 1992–2003, South Koreans marveled at the trade boost coming from China and began to contemplate for the first time since 1945 relying on a partner other than the United States with an impact on the future of reunification. Through the first decade of normalization, confidence in economic interests superseding security and national identity concerns generally remained high. ROK-US relations were rocked by pressure over US trade deficits, disagreement over how to respond to North Korea in 1993–4 when a US military response was on the table, and distrust generated by the Asian financial crisis and South Korea's necessity to accept International Monetary Fund assistance. US confidence meant that Seoul's warmth toward Beijing drew little resentment. In turn, Beijing applied little pressure except some effort to widen the Seoul-Tokyo divide. Kim Dae-jung sought to swing Tokyo as well as Beijing and Washington behind his Sunshine Policy. US power was overwhelming, and China had little hope of pushing South Korea far in its direction. If it fared better in driving a wedge between Seoul and Tokyo, this was overcome with the Sunshine Policy.

The period 2004–15 saw quite a few ups and downs in Sino-South Korean relations and some instances of US concern about its relations with the ROK. With

China host to the Six-Party Talks and South Korea under Roh keen on achieving a breakthrough with North Korea, the potential for tilting the triangle away from the long secure ROK-US axis had risen. Yet, on national identity and security grounds, China failed to make its case, even as closer economic ties boosted this leg of the triangle. Sino-US cooperation in 2006–7 on the Joint Agreement led North Korea to focus on bilateral talks with the United States, but Roh responded with his own initiative. Soon, however, China doubled down on the audacity of its narrative on the history of Koguryo, needlessly shocking South Koreans with a challenge seemingly about ancient identities but perceived as portending a threat to sovereignty if reunification were to occur. By the end of the Roh era on the internet, above all, a culture war had broken out, as both Chinese and South Koreans expressed anger at the other side's disrespect, offending cultural identity. Squandering an opportunity to build on a high level of goodwill in the South, after ROK-US relations had been unusually troubled, China greeted the arrival of Lee Myung-bak with a far more cavalier attitude toward the South, coming as Sino-US ties had slumped and US-ROK ties rebounded.

The period 2008 to 2010 saw Sino-ROK relations deteriorate for multiple reasons: the culture war intensified, China resented Lee's sharp tilt back toward the United States, and South Koreans were infuriated by China's refusal to blame North Korea for its attacks in 2010. Indeed, China's economic ties with North Korea were expanding rapidly, reducing the pressure the country faced just as it rejected the Six-Party Talks and upped its provocations. Through the end of Lee's tenure, there was scant turnaround in the troubled Sino-ROK dyad. Although the next president was another conservative, the atmosphere changed abruptly under Park Geun-hye, leading to almost three years of talk of "honeymoon" relations. Yet, Xi was emboldened to seek more from Park: seen in his 2014 speech at Seoul National University and in the victory parade message with a national identity thrust as Park stood at his side, seen too in the pressure against deploying THAAD batteries aimed at denying South Korea's right to self-defense and at splitting the ROK-US alliance, and, finally, seen in the unofficial, severe economic sanctions imposed in 2016–17, sending the message that South Korea's economic dependency on China would, from this time onward, be utilized to keep it in line. Japan was disinclined to woo South Korea, when its media went overboard in charging South Korea with succumbing to pro-China attitudes and, after Roh took office, a court case calling for Japanese companies to compensate forced laborers in the war era signified to Japan that the 1965 normalization agreement was no longer in effect. After brief hope in 2016 that the Japan-ROK agreement on "comfort women" would reset their relationship, it deteriorated over the history issue with little remedy in sight.

Eager to repair relations with China, Moon in late 2017 promised the "three noes" at some cost of sovereignty and alliance trust: no additional THAAD deployment, no participation in the US missile defense network, and no establishment of a trilateral military alliance including Japan.

He had given China a veto over South Korea's future missile defense, defense ties to Japan, and even elements of its US relations. Moon was driven by plans to woo Kim Jong-un, for which improved relations with China were indispensable, but

triangular dynamics were altered. Japan was deeply suspicious, compounding the bilateral split over historical memory differences.

The Trump impact on the triangle was mixed. He slighted alliance trilateralism, doing little to help alleviate the discord between Seoul and Tokyo. Shifting from loud threats to embraces, he empowered Moon to keep wooing Kim Jong-un to Japan's disapproval and with potential benefit to China, which sought engagement with Kim Jong-un. In his trade war with China, Trump left Moon in a difficult position since he sought better Sino-US relations for his own agenda, while Abe was heartened that the United States was taking the China threat more seriously, if not by tariffs that could harm Japan's trade with China. In response to Trump, Xi by 2018 had beckoned to Abe to improve relations and reached an agreement with Moon to reduce tensions. Thus, Trump gave a boost to Chinese ties with the other two, but these improvements were superficial, while poor Japan-ROK relations complicated triangularity before the 2020 pandemic halted diplomacy.

Biden held his first two in-person summits with Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, who had replaced Abe, and Moon, not only reaffirming bilateral relations but appealing for trilateralism and cooperation on the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy. Beijing was alienated not only by his tough line but also by the support given to it in Tokyo and, to a lesser degree, Seoul. Apart from renewed spread of the pandemic, notably in countries that had been spared the worst of the 2020 waves, diplomacy was set back by China's rejection of the US-led strategic alignment. Talk of Xi visiting Tokyo—planned first as a 2020 "cherry blossom" summit—and Seoul, as a follow-up to his 2019 visit to Pyongyang, had receded in these deteriorating conditions.

At the end of 2021, on the anniversary of the Nanjing massacre of December 13, 1937, Chinese officials warned of Japanese security and identity threats, the return to militarism, and the revival of right-wing, extremist thought. As evidence, they pointed to the remarks of top officials on the Taiwan issue, connivance with the United States over its Indo-Pacific strategy, pressure over human rights, and the visits by many Diet members to the Yasukuni Shrine. In this warning, we see another effort to drive a wedge between the United States and its ally while taking some satisfaction that South Korea remained cautious to take sides. In 2022, the situation changed abruptly. Japan stood firmly with the United States, as did South Korea in troubled times.

China's "wolf warrior" tone toward South Korea and increasing badgering of Japan made it more unpopular in these countries. As the Biden administration rallied them behind economic security and sanctions against Russia, their overlapping wariness toward China was apparent. Diplomacy in 2022 intensified to improve ROK-Japanese relations against the backdrop of Chinese threats. Cooperation on missile defense, technology export controls, and identity themes were at stake.

## Strategic Threat

Threat perceptions differ within the Sino-ROK-Japan triangle. China insists that the ROK-US alliance and steps it takes whether military exercises or missile defense are threatening to China. Japan as well as the United States increasingly perceives

China's military buildup as a threat and is even suspicious that China condones a rising threat from North Korea in order to weaken the United States and its alliances. Moreover, Japan sees Chinese ships, planes, and drones threatening its hold over the Senkaku Islands and China's outlandish sovereignty claims and military buildup in the South China Sea as a danger to trade lifelines. South Korea only feigns to disregard the threat from China to its security, as it prioritizes security concerns from North Korea. In this triangle, security has risen to the forefront in transforming the dynamics. In the 1990s, security threats seemed to be distant, although North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs and the tensions over Taiwan as the United States countered a Chinese show of force meant that security did draw some attention. Yet these were overshadowed by shared language about North Korea and optimism that the three legs of the triangle posed no security threat to each other. That optimism has faded from sight.

In the 2000s, the Six-Party Talks brought the three sides of this triangle together to consider not only North Korea's nuclear threat but also, in a Russia-led working group, regional architecture for a multilateral security framework. Seoul and Tokyo were dealing with tensions over history but also found themselves at odds in diplomacy over North Korea—Seoul taking a softer stance and Tokyo most skeptical about the 2007 Joint Agreement. By the end of the decade, however, Beijing's lack of concern about Pyongyang's provocations had brought a conservative leader in Seoul into more alignment with Tokyo. Meanwhile, China's posture had grown more assertive in the East and South China seas, raising the salience of security, especially for a nervous Japan.

By the late 2010s, each side in the triad had pressed to alter the security calculus beyond just responding to challenges from North Korea. China had taken the offense in striving to limit the ROK-US alliance, calling it a threat to China's security. While some dismiss the rhetoric from China as contrived, it put pressure on Seoul to some degree. Meanwhile, the US side had begun to place greater demands on Seoul to join in containing China, mostly in the South China Sea while taking some care to allow Seoul to stay aloof from the Taiwan arena. In turn, Seoul had hesitated openly to recognize the security polarization underway, pretending that it can play a constructive role, especially by helping to defuse the North Korea tinderbox, as it tried to in 2018.

The Biden administration is determined to draw both Japan and South Korea closer in blocking what is perceived as China's aggressive behavior. As the focus turned to Taiwan, Japan moved away from its decades of noninvolvement in the defense of Taiwan to suggest that it would be willing to cooperate with the United States in a contingency in the Taiwan Strait, while earlier "strategic ambiguity" in Washington appeared to be shifting to readiness to resist China's aggression. If Seoul kept its eyes almost entirely on Pyongyang, it allowed the name Taiwan to slip into the Biden-Moon joint statement of May 2021. Security issues had become critical to the triangle.

Security tensions are intensifying, leaving South Korea in an untenable situation as it risks deeply offending one or the other country in the triangle. Trump's demands for increased host-nation support strained ties briefly, but looming under

Biden were possible requests for active participation in regional defense seen in China as containment. Xi remains opposed to the earlier THAAD deployment and could use economic pressure or even military pressure through North Korea as a proxy to express displeasure with new moves. South Korea is left in a very exposed position in the triangle, with shared opposition to North Korea no longer foremost. Moon could not reassure Japan, but Yoon and Kishida Fumio offered hope of a fresh start with security foremost.

### **Economic Vulnerability**

In the 1990s, concern about becoming vulnerable to economic pressure from a neighbor could scarcely register. Openness to globalization was all the rage. Thirsting for investment and new technology, China was not in a mood to wield economic leverage for what would likely be seen as counterproductive gains. Old adversaries were opening the gates wide to trade and investment. As the 2000s started with China entering the WTO, these currents seemed to be growing stronger. Yet the “garlic war” of 2000, which saw China retaliate harshly against South Korea for steps to protect its garlic growers, was a portent of things to come. China retaliated with severe tariffs on cell phones and polyethylene, greatly raising the stakes. Trade had become a weapon for altering the behavior of an economic partner, only to be extended later to security and identity clashes.

In 2016–17, China resorted to unofficial sanctions as punishment for South Korea deploying the THAAD missile system; in 2018, the United States imposed massive tariffs on China to redress imbalances in the flow of trade; and in 2018, Japan put the export of vital supplies for South Korean industry under tightened scrutiny. At this time, souring mutual public opinion in Japan and South Korea led to boycotts and a sharp drop in tourism. Economics could not remain aloof from troubles in bilateral relations, although none of these measures interrupted the mainstream of trade flows.

The Biden administration did not remove Trump’s tariffs on Chinese goods but approached the challenge in a more strategic manner. Whereas some Americans had recklessly spoken of a vast decoupling of the US and Chinese economies, the new plans focused on limited decoupling to dual-use technology and supply chain reliability through diversification. Export controls, as well as restrictions on investments in critical industries, were amplified. Dependence of 5G on China was no longer acceptable. Impacting the China-Japan-South Korea triangle was the major effort made to coordinate with US allies to achieve these goals. Given the high level of interconnectedness of both Japan and South Korea’s economies with China, this process would take a long time. Early in the Biden administration, the US position was still being refined. Yet the overall message was clearly delivered: undue economic dependency on China posed a risk as did technology leakage.

Serious economic tests for the South Korea-China-Japan triangle lie around the corner. Sino-US economic tensions, as both sides strive to limit economic vulnerability, are bound to impact the bilateral linkages in this triangle. Japan was on board

but nervous about the costs to its economy and Chinese retaliation. Moon came to Washington in 2021 with a substantial economic delegation and promises regarding supply chains, giving the United States confidence in his cooperation. The fallout in ROK–Chinese relations from this alliance tightening became clearer in 2022 as the US economic strategy took shape, Kishida embraced economic security, and then Yoon took office as economic sanctions against Russia advanced and welcomed a breakthrough with Japan as well as closer coordination with the United States despite China’s economic reaction.

### **National Identity Incompatibility**

Symbols of distrust overwhelmed potential to draw on shared Confucian legacies. China and South Korea became mired in recurrent “culture wars.” The Chinese blamed ingratitude for its historical benevolence. Koreans perceived cultural arrogance, usurping their traditions and rejecting their autonomous history. Both South Koreans and Japanese grew bolder in calling out human rights abuses, affirming the liberal, international order with no further interest in themes of shared regional identity given China’s distortion of these.

Three identity narratives vie for recognition. First, there is historical, cultural identity. China, Japan, and Korea have more in common than any of these countries have with others. Second, there is a historical security identity dominated by Japanese aggression and imperialism over the half-century to 1945 but not limited to that. China finds this type of memory most convenient for drawing the ROK to its side in the triangle, but South Koreans recall one-sided dependence on China in previous centuries as well as invasions as a negative security experience, along with Japan’s invasion in the 1590s and interference nearly 1,000 years earlier. Finally, the narratives of the Korean War, Cold War, and liberal, democratic community versus communism have gained new ground. This potentially unites Tokyo and Seoul versus Beijing if they fixate on it, not on pre-1945.

Japan’s role in the tug-of-war between China and the United States over South Korea has varied. At times, Chinese and South Korean leaders have joined in criticizing Japan over its treatment of history or have brought the history issue to the forefront to mark their common views of Japan’s past. This leaves Japan isolated in the triangle and arouses US dissatisfaction with South Korea for shaking the unity needed to prod China to change. South Korea is perceived as vulnerable to China’s maneuvering, drawing on strategic pressure through North Korea, economic dependency through far closer trade ties with China than any other country, and an internal identity divide driven by Korean progressives frustrated by conservative compromises with the colonial order, Japan, and the United States, holding out hope for a breakthrough with North Korea to satisfy its identity quest. Chinese impatience, however, has risked tilting this triangle further to the side of the US–ROK dyad, as seen in 2004 and 2016—the first time in a case of national identity and the second in a matter of security with economic fallout arousing alarm mixed with “wolf warrior” rhetoric demonizing the South. Since 2016, evidence

of the authoritarian extremism and egregious human rights violations of China has made an impact, as reflected in negative Korean public opinion.

Japanese reacted to Chinese identity challenges earlier than South Koreans. The public's view of China as shaking off communism and reestablishing a Confucian-based society was shattered in 1989. The hope that China would not fixate on Japan's wartime conduct after frequent apologies and generous economic assistance was thwarted in the mid-90s patriotic education campaign. A last hope that cooperation in forging a regional identity would take precedence also collapsed in the late 2000s after ASEAN-centered regional institutions were welcomed and Hu Jintao's 2007 visit to Japan rekindled hope of cultural understanding and forward-looking identities unlike the Jiang Zemin visit in 1997 that put the spotlight on historical accusations and Chinese disrespect.

South Korean feelings of closeness to China spread after 1989 and did not encounter any hostile Chinese campaign in the 1990s. They were shattered only in 2004 when Koguryo claims came to life. To some extent, they rebounded, even after the culture wars late in that decade and after the negative coverage of South Korean history and society when Lee was president.

Once more, South Korean hopes were raised in what was called the "honeymoon" between Park and Xi until Xi went to Seoul in 2014 and overdid "playing the history card" against Japan, among other signs of arrogance. Only from the THAAD retaliation linked to "wolf warrior" rhetoric betraying Sinocentrism was public opinion firmly alienated from China. Korean reactions trailed Japanese ones by a diminishing number of years until by the 2020s both were similarly aggravated by Chinese rhetoric and behavior. Identity as democracies respectful of human rights prevailed in large part because China had opened unbridgeable identity gaps.

The Japanese-South Korean identity gap has not evolved with similar clarity. Under Abe and Moon, it widened further. In 2015, the United States made a valiant effort to resolve the latest breakdown and refocus on universal values and countering threats to them. Biden's team is steeped in that endeavor and is trying again with new leaders in both countries and a sense of a polarized region, engendered as illusions about China (and North Korea) were being more completely dispelled. Dissatisfied with the 1965 normalization agreement, which did not leave room for individual compensation for sex slaves and forced labor, South Koreans kept rejecting agreements to build future-oriented relations without history dragging ties down. In 2022, their new president pledged to refocus on the future and had a promising partner, unlike Abe who had kept arousing the Koreans with his historical revisionism, but big challenges remained for both.

## **Dynamics of the South Korea-China-Japan Triangle**

Japan had the upper hand in this triangle in the 1990s by virtue of its economic clout and more advanced technology. It made overtures to South Korea to put the history issue in the past and focus on the future and was mostly optimistic about economic ties reducing identity tensions with China as security remained secondary. This

triangle held the promise of being harmonious, even a community. Yet China played the “history card”; Japan agreed with the United States on revised defense guidelines in response to Taiwan Strait tensions; ties with South Korea were rocky. No marriage was in sight, as China’s rise drove Tokyo to look to Washington in the region.

South Korea envisioned a different kind of triangle. It would be at the center in a joint endeavor to transform North Korea without it depending on Japan and with a high level of mutual trust in ROK–Chinese relations, while its alliance with the United States served as insurance and gave it more clout. Optimism peaked in the 2000s to the point of talk about balancing China and Japan, as well as the United States and China. There was a rude awakening, however, first in 2004 with Chinese usurpation of the history of ancient Korea followed around 2008 in a “culture war” with China and in 2010 in China’s acquiescence to North Korean attacks. Fear of a fraying US–ROK relationship after ties to Japan had been damaged by Roh also contributed to a change of course. China was now too powerful and prosperous to defer to East Asian neighbors, scuttling their expectations.

China’s increasing dominance left bilateral relations more asymmetric and raised the stakes for the two weaker states to cooperate. Yet this did not happen in the early 2010s when bilateral ties to China were troubled, in 2016–17 when they had again deteriorated, or even in 2020–21 when the United States desired it the most. Seoul had its reasons: seeking Chinese help on North Korea, fearing economic retaliation, relying on the United States, and desiring to continue to play the “history card” as a keystone of the progressive agenda. Abe-led conservatives were unyielding on history after the failure of the 2015 “comfort women” agreement. They were also disappointed with Seoul’s weak posture toward China and North Korea, striving instead to outflank it with Washington, making the case that Japan’s regional security agenda leads the way in containing China’s aggression.

It is mostly up to Seoul how this triangle will evolve. The degree to which it will distance itself from Beijing and abandon hopes for reunifying with North Korea is uncertain. Its rapprochement with Tokyo will take effort by Washington and a new attitude of Japan’s leaders, as well as a decisive turnaround in Seoul. Illusions about the ROK–China–Japan triangle are unsustainable. The only viable identity for South Korea is as part of the liberal, international order, as China’s behavior has demonstrated. Bipolarity is draining the lifeline of triangularity as it has existed. Much depends on North Korea’s further rejection of the South and US diplomatic adroitness.

China had so alienated the public and politicians in both Japan and South Korea that conditions for joining against it were greatly boosted in the 2020s. Shared defense of the international order was high on the identity agenda, closer security cooperation was imperative under US leadership, and overlapping economic security concerns were obvious as US diplomacy aimed to capitalize.

Yet, there is no marriage between the two US allies. Bitter relations since 2018 will not be easy to repair despite the logic.

# 7

## SOUTH KOREA, JAPAN, THE UNITED STATES

### The New Face of the Alliance Triangle

Expectations of a far-reaching transformation in the alliance triangle date back to the Cold War. They rest on four pervasive assumptions. First, realist logic holds that a shared threat eventually leads to the conclusion that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” North Korea has posed an enduring threat, and the threat of the Soviet Union long loomed, as well as the threat of China, which had fought South Korea on the side of the North. Although threat perceptions changed abruptly after the Cold War, the potential of a threat from China’s growing power and revival of Russian power and the menace of a nuclear-armed North Korea have put an increased premium on alliance triangularity—e.g., in the area of missile defense. The weak ROK-Japan leg in the triangle with the United States has long been predicted to strengthen in line with US demands.

Two, the passage of time is said to heal all wounds, which was anticipated as Koreans who lived under Japan’s occupation and cultural genocide have died and interactions have intensified (normalization of relations and a surge in economic ties from 1965, a breakthrough in cultural ties in 1998 that was followed by the “Korean Wave” in Japan and the opening to Japanese culture in South Korea, and inundation of Japan with Korean tourists to the late 2010s). When the two nations discovered their cultural closeness, it was expected that they would find a lot in common or, at least, allow divisive memories to fade away in favor of normal neighborliness.

Three, the democratization of South Korea in the late 1980s brought both countries into the sphere of the liberal international community, where shared values mitigated against going to war and, presumably, perceiving each other as having hostile intentions. Given US leadership to solidify not only a triangular defense alliance but also a values alliance, clashing elements of national identity were expected to fade into the background. Shared support for a “free and open regional community” would align them closely together, especially given deepening challenges from neighbors bent on undermining such a community. Moreover, civil societies

in democratic countries are perceived as conducive to grassroots networking favorable to growing mutual trust.

Four, actual breakthroughs in negotiations and alarm from external dangers were viewed as they occurred, as determinative in fostering a new relationship between Japanese and South Koreans. In 1993–4, they faced a common threat from North Korea's nuclear weapons breakout, which was renewed in 2002 and beyond. Also, China's rise and assertive economic pressure on each, applying unofficial sanctions for political ends and challenging territorial claims, could have been recognized as a stimulus to work together. When critical ROK–Japanese summits were held in 1998 and 2015 or promising leadership alignments occurred, as in 2008 and 2013, as more conservative administrations took office in Seoul to join those in Tokyo, hopes were also raised. In the early 2020s, this factor was poised to revive along with realist and democratic factors.

US presidents pressed for triangularity in security, some interceded to assist the two allies toward overcoming tensions spiking over historical issues, and there was talk during Barack Obama's push for TPP of adding South Korea to the mix with Japan in the forefront in forging a regional economic community that would challenge China to alter its ways or remain on the outside. Whenever talk turned to ways to strengthen or even sustain the US presence in East Asia, high on the agenda was the importance of working more closely with the two principal US allies in the region not only individually but also in multilateral fashion as the backbone of a wider US-led community.

Expectations that the South Korea–Japan–US triangle would be the least problematic of the many triangles shaping Northeast Asia never were fully realized. To grasp why we need to look closely at the security, economic, and national identity issues influencing triangularity. Some remained tenaciously throughout the three decades under consideration. Others changed abruptly during this time frame. At no point do we see the hopes for three-way closeness nearing realization. At the end of the 2010s, further setbacks to Japan–ROK relations, as well as Donald Trump's disregard for firming up relations between US allies, raised new complications for a real, three-way alliance. In Biden's term, a push for trilateralism was underway, but it awaited new leadership in Seoul and Tokyo, which was on its way by early 2022 as the US regional strategy was being formalized. The presence of Kishida Fumio, a veteran of diplomacy with South Korea, and the election of Yoon Suk-yeol, promising to boost ties with Tokyo, boded well for a new US initiative.

Given ever-closer Japan–US relations, attention must turn to South Korea, above all the odd one out in this triangle. With numerous challenges in sight, its responses are in the spotlight. In the sections on security, economics, and identities, these challenges will be raised, one by one. As the leader in this triangle, the United States is weighing diplomatic moves to address these.

## Tests of Triangularity over Three Decades

Until the end of the 1980s, in the atmosphere of the Cold War, the alliance triangle appeared to be tightening as a result of three circumstances. First, the importance

of the US alliance for both Tokyo and Seoul was rising—the one newly anxious about the Soviet advance in Northeast Asia, and the other facing more belligerent behavior by North Korea as well as the Soviet downing of its civilian airliner. Also, intensifying economic relations between Seoul and Tokyo were leading to political relations, including summitry not considered possible at the time of normalization or in the ensuing 15 years. And third, US aspirations for more substantial regionalism, Japan's new goal of regionalism such as the Sea of Japan rim economic belt, and new South Korean interest in diplomatic diversification all held promise for this triangle, even if it was not the only focus.

Had the Cold War not ended abruptly, these conditions likely would have made a stronger sense of triangularity inevitable. Economically, South Korea's inability to develop ties with China left it dependent on its two main trading partners, although its transition to a developed economy was leading to a search for production networks similar to those Japan had been forging across Asia. For security, the tightening US-Japan alliance was setting the tone for a tenser regional standoff, as Beijing was still inclined to approve it and Seoul could not help but recognize its necessity if that did not yet lead to its open acceptance of security triangularity. Finally, the national identity challenge from an assertive Soviet Union was fresh in people's memories, as North Korea only compounded it, while the Reagan administration showcased a clearer US ideological contrast. If Mikhail Gorbachev's impact was beginning and South Korea's democratization was becoming a factor, it was unclear if they would lead to a surge of shared triumphalism about a liberal international order or be upturned by a Soviet reversal. In the background was new talk of a region on the rise with "Confucian capitalism," whose identity could coexist with acceptance of the international community. If Japan was seen as its natural leader, Korea's "economic miracle" was attracting the most recent admiration, and it was the most enthusiastic advocate of the Confucian tradition.

South Korea's *Nordpolitik* as well as the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union altered the course of the South Korea-Japan-US triangle. Seoul's options widened, and its goals for reshaping the region centered on a process of reunification on the peninsula eclipsed interest in giving any boost to triangularity. For a time, Tokyo adjusted its course, recognizing the merits of improving ties to Seoul as part of its pursuit of regional leadership and, perhaps, seeking to counter the groundswell of enthusiasm about ROK-Chinese relations. Yet, security, economic, and national identity conditions in the 1990s worked against the sort of triangle anticipated in the 1980s. The security imperative suddenly seemed to have disappeared, as the new Russian state had turned from military goals to economic ones, and North Korea had been isolated as it fell into economic freefall. Since the triangle was conceived overwhelmingly as a security necessity, the rationale for it was greatly reduced. Late in the decade, Japan was alarmed by a North Korean missile test and the US responded to troubles with the 1994 Agreed Framework with the DPRK after failing to win support in 1994 for a possible military strike or for an active trilateral coordination oversight group with allies. The US-Japan alliance drew renewed attention as the PRC attempted a show of force toward Taiwan. Yet,

Seoul was keen on staying away from military ties that Beijing might oppose, seeking its support in dealing with Pyongyang. Prospects for triangular resolve versus Pyongyang stumbled as Seoul offered the Sunshine Policy in 1998.

The economics and national identity cases for the ROK-Japan-US triangle also suffered in the transitional decade of the 1990s. South Korean economic aspirations turned decisively to China. Its level of dependence on Japan was dropping, reducing a second incentive to upgrade relations. Japan's focus also heavily centered on China as did that of the United States. Meanwhile, calls in the United States to do something about trade deficits with Japan and South Korea faded, damping prior attention to this economic arena without quickly erasing memories of perceived unfairness. This triangle lingered only as a peripheral economic interest. In contrast, it aroused hand-wringing over national identity tensions centered on historical symbols, especially "comfort women" and Japanese failure to accept the historical verdicts after World War II.

As China launched a campaign to demonize Japan over history, South Korea appeared to associate itself with that. In turn, Japan's leaders grew more assertive after Murayama Tomiichi's statement on the 50th anniversary of the war's end in what South Koreans considered to be historical revisionism. The ups and downs of responses to this issue left this relationship confused despite the Kim Dae-jung-Obuchi Keizo summit agreement in 1998 and the generally positive cohosting of the World Cup in 2002. Earlier momentum for triangularity was broken even before Roh Moo-hyun set the relationship back from 2003 with his attacks on Koreans under the occupation who were now called "pro-Japan" and their legacy and his efforts to find a balance between Washington and Beijing to boost overtures to Pyongyang.

When Lee Myung-bak in 2008 gave new priority to relations with Japan, and Obama followed with eagerness to boost the triangle with the two allies after the Six-Party Talks had failed, it seemed that triangularity would be fully achieved at last. The North Korean threat was greater now that it was armed with nuclear weapons and willing to flex its muscles as if retaliation no longer was an option. China's refusal to criticize the North's attacks on the South in 2010 gave South Koreans reason to fear its future impact, while Japan from 2011 grew alarmed by China's aggressive behavior in the East China Sea. US-ROK relations had been on the mend and so had US-Japanese relations after the brief Hatoyama interlude. Imposing unilateral sanctions on the North, Seoul saw Beijing keep expanding its economic ties to that country. Yet, somehow, the ROK-Japan leg of the triangle again frayed, symbolized by the anger aroused in Tokyo by the August 2012 visit of Lee to Dokdo/Takeshima and only months later Abe Shinzo's return to the top post promising an unprecedented level of historical revisionism. Obama was at a loss.

The roller-coastal ride of Seoul-Tokyo relations persisted as a sudden turnabout came with the December 2015 agreement on "comfort women" followed by the 2017 repudiation of the spirit of the deal by Moon Jae-in. The Obama administration played a critical behind-the-scenes role in 2015 but left office frustrated that it had not led to a breakthrough. The Trump administration was less interested in multilateralism, including triangles, as it pressured both Seoul and Tokyo over security and economics while

abandoning any unifying national identity message. Security triangularity stayed largely on a gradual course of improvement, even as both sides were shaken by Trump's war threats in 2017, but US leadership on an economics or values triangle slipped.

In late November 2018, a working group was established to increase US-ROK coordination on North Korea after concerns were raised that Seoul was informing Washington of major moves with Pyongyang rather than consulting (no US veto was under consideration). Yet, sensitive to its sovereign rights, especially in dealing with fellow Koreans, Seoul wanted to keep this low-key, avoiding even calling this a consulting group. As many in Washington feared that its moves had implications for sanctions and were uncertain about the vision behind them, this mechanism would, at least, give the US side some reassurance and, perhaps, input into how sanctions could be affected. If there were to be sanctions waivers, as occurred earlier in 2018 during the course of Olympics diplomacy when Washington gave its okay, they would not be sprung one-sidedly.

For Tokyo, this working group was a welcome check on Moon's reckless overtures. In 2019, as US-DPRK talks broke down, Tokyo breathed a sigh of relief, and Seoul feared that its best hope had collapsed. The residue of their distrust remained with no further effort by Trump to achieve a full alliance triangle, while Biden was obliged to start slowly in rebuilding trilateral relations.

The Japan-ROK leg of the triangle suffered a sharp setback when, after the "comfort women" agreement was repudiated in Seoul, a court ruling demanded that Japanese firms pay restitution to Korean forced labor, which Japan took as a violation of the normalization of 1965, on which bilateral relations rest. In 2019, Japan imposed export controls on vital Korean imports. The way forward remained unclear before Moon's term expired in 2022, even as Abe's departure in 2020 and Biden's start in 2021 already fueled discussions of steps to break this serious impasse. Yoon won the presidency, eager to improve ties with Japan as US efforts intensified—many focused first on a coalition in Asia to join that in Europe to punish Russia for its aggression in Ukraine but not without an eye toward closer security ties vs. China and North Korea, tighter coordination on economic security, and revitalized joint identity in defense of the liberal international order.

## Security Threat

This triangle centers on an outside security threat while within it no indication of any threat has been detected since the end of World War II. Some in South Korea speak of remilitarization of Japan, pointing to a possible future threat. Some in Japan fear that South Korea will break away from its alliance with the United States due to either reunification or to an accommodation with China. US concern about either of these possibilities is much less. The one issue that arouses some fear of a conflict—the territorial dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima—is not viewed as leading Japan to try to change the status quo by force. Thus, within the triangle, tensions are not from security concerns even if they sometimes give rise to speculation that security someday will be in play.

The reality is that this triangle has been built primarily on a single external security threat when perceptions of managing that threat largely overlapped. As the threat has intensified, thinking on how to address it has diverged, although not in a consistent fashion. This can be seen in decisions about increased means of deterrence, tougher sanctions policies, and more proactive diplomacy. Leadership is a wild card: progressives in Seoul lean toward diplomatic activism and sanctions relief, and Trump opted for extremes from replacing deterrence with a preventative strike to just insisting that personal diplomacy is working when evidence for that was missing. Abe appeared at three points in Japan's response to the ups and downs of US or ROK policies toward the North. He took the lead in pressing Koizumi Junichiro in 2002 to abandon the diplomatic track after the summit in Pyongyang that revealed the existence of Japanese abductees. Objecting to the Joint Agreement of 2007 as prime minister, he was the outlier before he left office that year before the Six-Party Talks failed. Finally, he returned to that post seeking information and the return of additional possible abductees while taking a hard line as the war scare arose in 2017 and diplomacy took off in 2018. Differences on how to manage the threat shook all sides of the triangle over three decades despite some periods of closer cooperation on increased deterrence and on sanctions.

US-Japan agreement on security kept advancing from decade to decade: Tokyo committing to the alliance unreservedly in the 1980s, new defense guidelines widening the geographical range of the alliance in the 1990s, the Koizumi-Bush alignment in the 2000s, and Abe's "collective defense" breakthrough in the 2010s. By the end of the 2010s, the alliance had broadened to solid agreement on the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and North Korea. If Trump's diplomatic style unnerved Tokyo at times, US officials made clear that there would be no abandonment—the foremost concern—and a \$60 billion infusion of US funds for developmental assistance in Asia opened the door to Japan-US-Australian economic cooperation in support of security goals. US efforts to draw South Korea into a broader security posture stumbled against its obsession with North Korea, even more so under Moon. If in the Lee and Park Geun-hye periods there was much talk of "Global Korea" and lively coordination in hosting international conferences on nuclear security and other issues, Seoul demurred from anything that would not only distract it from its priority but could offend Beijing, whose cooperation was foremost. Yet when hope for China faded, Moon reinforced US ties and agreed to wording on regional issues.

Under Korean conservatives, triangularity could, at times, make wider gains, but progressives usually played the national identity card more energetically and let Japan-ROK relations flounder apart from security cooperation centered on the United States and exclusively focused on North Korea. In Japan there was fear that even this limited cooperation could be undermined by spillover from national identity themes such as the "comfort women" or association of Japan's defense moves with "remilitarization" seen through a historical lens. In South Korea, the fear was that pressure from the United States would widen the scope of security triangularity, as in involvement in the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" planning, alienating China and undermining a strategy for North Korea. In 2017, Moon had little

room to maneuver as Trump ratcheted up pressure on the North, and Kim Jong-un eschewed diplomacy to build his military machine, providing a good environment for triangular security advances. But in 2018, with hopes for North Korea heightened, Moon was more hesitant to do more than the minimum with Japan—e.g., balking at missile defense exercises.

In 2021, the US-Japan security consensus hardened on the South China Sea, broadened into the Indian Ocean, and galvanized around the defense of Taiwan from a now possible PRC attack. Seoul was on the outside of this tightening bond. Isolated with no openings to China, North Korea, or Russia, it edged closer to the United States. In his summit with Biden, Moon yielded ground in mentioning Taiwan and the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” but this fell short of the clarity of the commitment of the other two states in the triangle. Security differences persisted, but as long as North Korea boosted its threat and China’s image was dark, the security thrust of this triangle was sustained. In a polarized environment, it was likely to grow stronger, putting pressure on Seoul to strengthen the ROK-Japan leg in defense, including missile defenses sought by the US.

In early 2022, the war in Ukraine proved to be a game changer, boosting bipolarity in security. Arms budgets rose abruptly, missile defenses acquired new urgency, and military threats in Europe and Asia became linked in new ways. Alarm that North Korea would act provocatively added one more reason for Seoul and Tokyo to join with Washington on a new security agenda.

Two security challenges would put pressure on Seoul to solidify the triangle. First, if Pyongyang posed an urgent military threat, Seoul would be bound to agree to US pressure for that. Second, if China forced a contingency over Taiwan, the South China Sea, or the East China Sea, there would be calls for Seoul to join the United States and Japan in responding. Already, amid talk of Taiwan contingencies, this issue was under discussion in early 2022. Given the possibility that North Korea would seize on such a crisis to create its own crisis, Seoul’s focus could remain on the peninsula even if it would be expected its support peaceful means of resolution in opposition to China. Wishful thinking that Sino-US relations can recover somewhat and North Korea aims to return to talks on denuclearization would give way to clear acceptance of security triangularity.

## **Economic Vulnerability**

South Korea found itself vulnerable to Japan in the 1960s to 1980s due to its economic needs. Decisions about normalization and summitry reflected economic urgency rather than political rethinking. Both South Korea and Japan responded to unprecedented economic pressure from Trump from 2017 with concessions due both to security needs and vulnerability to sanctions Trump imposed or threatened. Having already signed an FTA with Washington, Seoul learned that this was not enough to assure smooth economic ties, and it renegotiated under pressure. Similarly, having agreed to join with Washington in TPP, Tokyo discovered that, unlike Obama, Trump would resort to bullying to press for a bilateral deal in place of TPP more in

his country's favor. Trade tensions had arisen in the 1980s, with Washington accusing Tokyo and Seoul of protectionist policies and after quieting for a quarter century resurfaced at the end of the 2010s. In their dispute over history, Tokyo and Seoul raised trade barriers too, alerting Seoul to its economic vulnerability. Yet Biden's push for secure supply chains and high-tech decoupling from China presumed a new degree of economic integration, which Seoul and Tokyo could scarcely resist.

The balance on trade issues kept changing. The focus of US blame in the 1980s and early 1990s was on Japan's unfairness, as the Japanese saw themselves vulnerable to US pressure and sought a way to escape. In the Asian financial crisis of 1997, many Koreans blamed the United States for the sharp, if brief, fall in their economy, also seeking more diversification and a way to reduce pressure. In the early 2010s, Korea was the first with an FTA with the United States, giving it an edge over Japan; then Japan countered with TPP, as some anticipated pressure on Seoul to join, although Trump rejected the pact before putting pressure on both to agree to new, bilateral trade deals. Even after Seoul did so, it was still under pressure. Neither Tokyo nor Seoul could escape the sensation that at any time a trade war could be launched against it. In Trump's trade war with China, their firms were also heavily exposed. Yet the atmosphere shifted abruptly to coordination under Biden. If his administration was pressing for security trilateralism, it also was intent on economic security coordination on an unprecedented scale. In addition to appealing to both of its allies for more stringent export controls and high-tech decoupling, the reorientation of supply chains and dual-use technology cooperation would likely have a major trilateral component. Vulnerability to the outside drove strengthened trilateralism to limit each country's threat from China, most of all.

Bipolarity poses the challenge of Washington making decoupling requests beyond what Seoul considers prudent and of Beijing imposing tough economic sanctions for what Seoul agrees to do. Caught in the middle with its economic future at stake, Seoul will be hard-pressed to take a firm stand. This became a test of triangularity as the United States prioritized this more for economic security. In 2022, that is what happened against the backdrop of war convulsing Europe.

## National Identity Incompatibility

Symbols of identity differences riled Japan-ROK relations, even as the shared identity of these countries with the United States received ever more recognition. The two symbols of "comfort women" and forced labor stood in the forefront as US allies demonized each other, particularly at Seoul's instigation. The Biden administration was intent on forging a "community of democracies" and joined with Japan in the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP). Taking office, Yoon was on the spot to join, in some manner, this FOIP initiative. This would boost Japan-ROK ties with an upbeat identity focus.

South Korea and Japan have labored for the entire period since World War II with a contradiction in the way they construct their national identities, which only intensified when progressives took power in Seoul and conservatives shook

off progressive constraints in Tokyo. The way normalization occurred infuriated Koreans, especially progressives, and emboldened Japan's conservatives to expect to overcome this identity gap with little need to compromise. The successful outcome of the Cold War for both countries further encouraged these forces driving ongoing identity debates to expect new successes in dealing with this identity gap. South Koreans saw no need to kowtow further to Japan with their economy, especially in the 1990s, outpacing Japan's, and, following an interlude of loss of power, resurgent Japanese conservatives rebelled against recent overtures to South Korea on historical issues. A last-ditch attempt in 1998 when Kim Dae-jung sought to spur diplomacy with all of the states targeted for his "Sunshine Policy," proved valiant but not transformative. It did not change Japan's conservative agenda, to which Koizumi catered with annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, or satisfy Korean progressives, as seen in Roh following Kim Dae-jung with renewed demonization of Japan. Korean conservatives succumbed to the temptation to "play the Japan card" to boost popularity, as seen in the late Lee and early Park years. No diminution in the bilateral national identity gap was visible.

The South Korea-Japan identity gap has long been puzzling to observers. It manifested itself in a "hate Korea" surge in Japan prior to the agreement of December 2015 and in Korean perceptions of Japan that failed to reciprocate improved Japanese ones of Korea on occasions when they were perceptible. Japanese aspired to closer mutual attitudes but were resistant to examining the steps they could take to bring about this outcome. South Koreans sought closure to their feelings of humiliation and victimization by Japan and could not be satisfied with letting the matter drop.

While there is no indication that mutual trust is developing, there are some signs that pragmatism can gain ground. When the US side concludes that the tensions between its allies are dangerous, its appeals can make a difference, as Seoul and Tokyo hesitate to enlarge the identity gap with their ally. When youth unemployment spurs South Koreans to seek solutions and the Japanese labor market beckons, the outflow of Korean labor to Japan surges. As the two sides had come to know each other better, tourism had risen sharply until the 2019 spat over history and Japan's export controls as a form of sanctions. Identity trumps pragmatism if leadership fails, as it did in the Korean progressives' court appointments bound to undermine the foundation of bilateral ties.

In 2017–18, ROK-Japanese relations were again buffeted by ROK arousal of the national identity gap. Pulling out of the 2015 "comfort women" agreement, punctuated by declaring that Seoul would return the money Japan had put into a fund for the women, rekindled the identity gap. A Korean court decision on Japanese companies owing compensation for forced labor was seen in Japan as a violation of the 1965 normalization agreement, also putting Korean officials striving pragmatically to manage relations in a bind, as a working group was created to decide how to proceed. Japanese were frustrated, but officials kept a low profile, waiting to see Seoul's moves.

Both Seoul and Tokyo were acutely sensitive to US criticism over national identity differences with each other, blaming the other entirely for the problem and resenting Washington calling on both sides to seek an accommodation. Japanese

were particularly resentful of such a US posture, insisting that identity issues were not caused by them and were not altering their approach to the bilateral relationship. When Moon broke away from the 2015 agreement and when the Korean court demanded compensation, Japan had no tolerance for anything but full-fledged blame on Seoul. There was little benefit to US intervention. The best hope was to refocus identity interest.

The message from Seoul at the end of the 2010s was do not demonize Pyongyang, which could end diplomacy; avoid alienating Beijing, which could destroy the environment for diplomacy; do not worry about renewed South Korean historical resentments toward Tokyo since they are now kept separate from security issues; and separate Russian conduct in Northeast Asia from how it is misbehaving elsewhere since Moscow needs to be kept engaged in diplomacy with Pyongyang. On this basis, how could Seoul and Washington forge a shared vision? Having felt powerless in 2017, Seoul had substituted “hope” in a long-shot process that clouded its vision, complicating trust with Washington. It was alienating Tokyo—seen in Washington as a blow at the US vision and US security plans—and refusing to see how Pyongyang was demonizing itself, and Beijing and Moscow were making it essential to draw clear, moralistic lines. Moon’s “peace first” view coupled with Trump’s shift in 2018 to “peace at all costs” as if he personally could accomplish this on the basis of some vague exchanges with Kim Jong-un made for a dead-end partnership.

The message from Tokyo at this time was keep demonizing Pyongyang, which could avoid an agreement antithetical to shared values and interests, and give up on a forward-looking, identity-based approach to Seoul, which would not even celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Kim-Obuchi breakthrough of 1998 let alone abide by the 2015 Park-Abe breakthrough. Washington can do all it can to boost trilateral security relations, which Tokyo welcomes even if Seoul refuses to allow a Japan-flagged naval vessel to dock at its port, but it must avoid even-handedness in calls to heal the history divide between its two allies. One was willing to compromise and be forward-looking, while the other has proven unreliable and unworthy of further efforts to find common ground. Japanese view Moon as an extremist; South Korean progressives viewed Abe as an extremist—not an environment for contemplating progress to reduce national identity divides.

The messaging had changed in 2021. Moon insisted that he was eager to rebuild relations but not with interference in the court proceedings. Abe’s successors sought a change in Seoul’s posture, awaiting Moon’s successor. At least the mutual recriminations had quieted, as Biden appealed for shared reaffirmation of universal values in support of future-oriented cooperation. Biden put the focus on a community of democracies in opposition to authoritarian outrages as were occurring in China. Seoul agreed in principle, but it sought to avoid alienating China.

Incompatible national identities pose a tremendous barrier to resolving the dilemma over North Korea. The US side and South Korean conservatives had a visceral opinion of the old North Korea, an “evil” state, totally untrustworthy even when it agrees to some offer and incorrigible due to the very nature of the regime. It was not a partner but a trickster calling on you to “sale the same horse” for the

umpteenth time. There was no reason to conjure up a new North Korea; its totalitarian nature and human rights abominations remained the same. Progressive South Koreans were inclined to accept ambiguity in the history of the peninsula from 1945, crediting the North's sincerity about liberation and blaming collaborators while also anticipating that shared Korean identity would serve to overcome some artificial identity. Japan distrusted even US overtures to North Korea, convinced earlier than the United States that there was no prospect of persuading the North. Differences over how to apply values in dealing with the North Korean challenge prevailed.

In China, these differences were present too. The United States was sharpest in condemning human rights abuses, Japan was more cautious for fear of economic costs and amplified Chinese resort to the "history card." South Korea was the most cautious, given worry over China's North Korea policy and economic pressure, as well as the impression that it was China's prime target for retribution. Yet China alienated one state after another. The United States was most enraged, Japan edged toward the same posture, and even South Korea, driven by public opinion from 2016, became more openly critical.

After China's insensitive running roughshod over South Korea in response to THAAD, few had illusions about increasing mutual trust. Even so, affirming democratic values, the rule of law, and a regional community with Japan as well as the United States in opposition to China remained a challenge. Trump had ignored values, but Biden stressed them with promising possibilities.

## **Dynamics of the South Korea-US-Japan Triangle**

The weakness of the Japan-ROK leg of the triangle has multiple dimensions. It is rooted in a national identity clash especially animated from the Korean side. It has a security dimension since a vocal group of South Koreans views Japan's military buildup not as due to threats from China and North Korea but as remilitarization motivated by similar offensive designs. Finally, as South Korea transforms from a developing economy highly dependent on Japanese technology to an economy in important sectors the equal of Japan's, the sense of economic rivalry is growing. The national identity factor motivates security concerns and zero-sum thinking about economic pursuits. The United States failed to cultivate a narrative of trilateralism on universal values in competition with the rising tide of authoritarian values, on shared security threats eclipsing a possible threat from Japan, and of joint pursuit of an open, market-dominated regional economy. This failure under Trump was remedied under Biden with hope focused on a new Korean president.

At each stage of improvement in Japan-ROK relations, the United States has played a decisive role. In these diplomatic efforts, the United States failed to secure the kind of commitment from Japan that it presumably had sought from a defeated power. It prioritized Japan's support for the Cold War and its assistance to the South Korean economy. The national identity divide between allies is not usually a US priority, particularly when one ally is mired in pacifism posing no threat to the other and the other is obsessed with anti-communism consistent with US goals. It

was assumed that the younger generation would be less consumed with historical sentiments and shift identity thinking to universal values or that increased economic interdependency would build trust. The end of the Cold War and the North Korean push for nuclear weapons gave further confidence to Americans that Tokyo and Seoul would grow closer. US overtures to both sides to cooperate continued, but each grew less inclined to listen as foreign policy options broadened in the 1990s.

Politics in the two countries worked against mutual trust. Korean progressives were seeking to improve ties with Pyongyang while feeling that in economics as well as security deference to Tokyo was not only unnecessary but shameful. Japanese conservatives no longer felt checked by progressives or even the United States, growing bolder in “Korean passing” as the prime target in their historical revisionism. The national identity gap overwhelmed forces for improving relations.

The situation in the 2020s is markedly different. North Korea and China pose shared security threats, as Beijing wields threatening economic power and defies earlier identity expectations. Bipolarity raises many challenges for Seoul, but its options have been narrowing. Progressives desperately tried to salvage their North Korea-centered diplomacy to no avail. Conservatives were ready to tilt decisively to the US. These are positive omens for tightening trilateralism. A new conservative president in a tense international environment boded well for trilateralism.

One of the biggest challenges for US diplomacy is to transform this triangle into a three-way security alliance with shared high-tech economic coordination and consciousness of shared identity. In seven decades since the Korean War, hopes had been repeatedly dashed. The era of triangularity over the past three decades was not conducive to these aims. With rising bipolarity in the 2020s, the prospects have improved, but adept diplomacy on all three sides will be required.



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**PART III**

New Tests for the Japan-US  
Alliance



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# 8

## JAPAN, THE UNITED STATES, CHINA

### East Asia's Core Great Power Triangle

Japan became the pivot of the triangle with China and the United States by 1991, rushing to be first to strengthen relations with China after the Tiananmen massacre of 1989 and aspiring to forge an East Asian regional community, at first separate from the United States and then inclusive of its ally as concern about China's intentions mounted. Apart from a period in the early 2010s when Sino-Japanese relations hit their nadir and China tried to entice the United States with a "new type of major power relations," Japan remained the pivot. Even when Sino-Japanese relations were troubled, Chinese officials sought to drive a wedge between the two allies, treating Japan as the likelier target, and some Japanese officials were eager to reach a breakthrough with China, renewing the quest for autonomous diplomacy, capitalizing on close economic relations, or hedging against uncertainty about Sino-US relations. The main story in this triangle was Sino-Japanese relations.

The trend line in Sino-Japanese relations was downward. There were plenty of ups and downs, but each decade witnessed deepening distrust over security questions, economic vulnerability, and national identity incompatibility. China was the driving force, although it capitalized on images of Japanese historical revisionism, as in massive demonstrations in 2005 after Koizumi Junichiro kept visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, including war criminals. China's military threat grew, with gray zone tactics from 2011 to wrest the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands from Japan in the forefront. China demonstrated its economic clout, briefly cutting off exports of rare earth minerals. And China could raise or lower the pressure on historical memory issues depending on its agenda.

The Sino-US leg of the triangle trended downward as the Japan-US leg moved upward. After a Chinese fishing boat rammed a Japanese vessel in 2011 and China played hardball, ignoring the facts, the Sino-Japanese relationship did not recover. In the case of Sino-US relations, a point of no return came by 2015 when China broke a promise not to militarize the artificial islands it was building in the South China Sea.

By 2018, the downward spiral reflected alarm at multiple moves by China—maritime security threats, economic backtracking from reform and openness, and a surge in “wolf warrior” rhetoric indicative of arrogant intolerance of discourse spreading abroad.

When Abe Shinzo visited China in late October 2018, he and Xi Jinping agreed that after seven difficult years, their countries had made a “fresh start.” Some analysts saw Abe hedging against the United States after various slights and persistent unpredictability by Donald Trump. As had happened in 1971–72 when Richard Nixon shocked Japan by repairing relations with China without any consultations, 1991–92 when Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki took the lead in repairing relations with China leading to the emperor’s visit at a time of deeply troubled Sino-US relations and unusual uncertainty in Japan-US relations, and 2009–10 when the Democratic Party of Japan took power intent on forging an East Asian community with China while destabilizing ties to the United States, there was talk of far-reaching change in this triangular framework. Yet, the logic of the US-Japan alliance was becoming stronger than ever at the end of the 2010s. The strategic necessity of it had increased, the bedrock of values undergirding it had remained solid, and the personal networks promoting goodwill between the two peoples were assumed to be impervious to Trump’s temporary impact. This triangle has been tested on multiple occasions by both sides, but there is no reason to think that Beijing can get either side to lose faith in an enduring alliance.

Even if the US-Japan marriage has been in little doubt for six decades despite moments of unease, the triangular dynamics with China warrant close scrutiny. They affect the behavior of all three sides. They have often set the tone for the wider region. And this triangle, more than any other, has impacted the remaining triangles of East Asia. South Korea, Russia, India, Australia, and ASEAN often look to this triangle when deciding on their own foreign policies in the region. In economics, this is obviously the premier triangle. In security, it pits the principal US alliance in the region against the state most intent on testing the strength of that relationship. Finally, in national identity, this triangle is where themes such as “Asian values,” a shared “community” as the basis of exclusive Asian regionalism, and a FOIP have been tested.

Three themes pervade the bilateral relationships in this triangle over recent decades. One is the search for a personal bond between Japan’s prime minister and the US president that would bring ties to a higher level. The Nakasone Yasuhiro-Ronald Reagan “Ron-Yasu” relationship and the George W. Bush-Koizumi relationship set the bar high, and Abe’s pursuit of Trump aspired to similar success for an across-the-board upgrading of this side of the triangle, in each case conscious of China’s role. As the first foreign leader to visit the White House, Suga Yoshihide was seeking a similar bond with Joe Biden, but his departure from office months later made it likely that Kishida Fumio would have that honor if in the time of a pandemic such personal networks were still a possibility.

A second theme is the repeated promise of a “thaw” or “fresh start” to Sino-Japanese relations, as occurred abortively in 1984–85, 1991–92, 1999–2000, and 2006–8, among other years. Over and over again, Japanese leaders wait for China’s leadership to change course and value bilateral ties more only to end up disappointed

when plans are shelved and anger toward Japan is revived, sometimes with accusations that Japan has committed some act that has broken mutual trust. The Xi-Abe meeting also “broke the ice,” but only after a deep and personal chill with no follow-up as planned in a Xi state visit in 2020 not only due to the pandemic, as many in Japan opposed it.

The third theme is a US cycle of presidential campaigns critical of China, followed before long by a warming trend, and then some mixture of intense engagement and wary balancing. That ended by the late Barack Obama years, followed by Trump, and, most consistently, by Biden. In the early 2020s, the Japan-US bond was strong regardless of personal warmth, Sino-Japanese relations were chilly with or without summits, and US policy toward China was fixated on rising conflict.

Triangularity is well-indicated by Tokyo’s great sensitivity and responses to shifts in Sino-US relations, Beijing’s alertness to opportunities to capitalize on changes in US-Japan relations, and Washington’s role in supporting Japan at times of rising tensions in Sino-Japanese relations. Focusing on bilateral dynamics is insufficient for gaining a deep-seated understanding of East Asian relations. From the 1990s, the Japan-China-US triangle had captured the most sustained attention of all the triangles, combining security, economics, and national identity narratives. By the 2020s, however, the Grand Strategic Triangle had risen to the forefront, as Sino-Japanese ties took a backseat to Sino-US and Japan-US ties with scant sign of impacting international affairs.

## Tests of Triangularity over Three Decades

Tests of triangularity mainly came from China, sensing an opening in Japan’s pursuit of it or an issue in Japan-US relations or reacting to a downturn in Sino-US relations deciding to appeal to persistent Japanese interest in boosting relations. Washington was not much interested in driving a wedge between Tokyo and Beijing since this proved unnecessary. Tokyo showed some interest in capitalizing on tensions between Washington and Beijing but mainly just to restore normalized ties to Beijing not with the aim of driving Washington and Beijing further apart. The more powerful China became, the less Japan was inclined to give it hope for rebalancing the triangle with the exception of the 2009–10 Hatoyama regime driven by a more idealistic outlook.

Tokyo has sought to play a more instrumental role in the triangle with Washington and Beijing than before. In the mid- to late 1980s, it imagined itself as the rising economic leader of Asia with a much greater stake in supporting China’s reforms and rise than the United States had, the inspiration as a model for more harmonious state-society relations than the US model of capitalism, and a more patient partner in dealing with China’s less than smooth transition from traditional communism. After all, the two have a shared Confucian legacy, and Japan’s model and economic linkages had been critical to “economic miracles” around China’s borders. Yet, Chinese leaders—more for internal consumption than openly—questioned Japan’s right to be a political, as well as a military, great power and attacked its aspirations for regional leadership, as well as a triangular impact.

Again, in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis and continuing into the early 2000s, Tokyo anticipated a leadership role, this time in the emergence of East Asian regionalism, expecting to act as a surrogate for the United States but with some autonomy. Although Beijing weighed upgrading ties to Tokyo in 2000 and again in 2003, it responded to Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine with fury and fought hard to advance a different path to ASEAN-centered regionalism. Finally, in 2009–10, Beijing had the dual opportunity of Obama's early interest in boosting bilateral relations and Hatoyama's unprecedented idealism about sharing regional leadership, but Beijing was turning in a hard-line direction and gave Hatoyama little in return.

China has not had much leverage over Japan. It could charge militarism, hoping to arouse the progressive camp, but that is a spent force uninterested in mounting a challenge to the alliance and less capable of resisting an abrupt shift toward rearmament and collective defense, albeit with an incremental budget. It could flex its muscles as in "fishing vessels" sailing by the Senkaku/ Daiyou Islands, although the impact is less a retreat to pacifism under the threat of conflict than rising sentiment critical of China. Alternatively, China could, as in "new thinking" in early 2003 when a few authors tested ways of increasing Chinese soft power in Japan through a change in coverage of what that country is like, make an appeal by narrowing the identity gap. This failed for three main reasons: China only made a short-term tactical shift, failing to offer a sustained transition away from preceding intense criticism; retreating in the face of enraged national identity arguments it had earlier unleashed, China proved it would not be satisfied with modest improvements in Sino-Japanese relations without major changes in Japan-US alliance ties; and the fundamentals of the power shift in East Asia left Japanese too wary to contemplate serious adjustments in triangular dynamics. Thus, since the end of the Cold War, there has not been any major transformation of the US-Japan marriage in favor of China's acceptance within the triad.

Leadership changes have tested the US-Japan relationship more than China's relations with the two since the dual normalizations of relations in the 1970s. Indeed, those breakthroughs in 1971–2 were the biggest failure in the US-Japan relationship since 1945 when Nixon failed to alert the Japanese to his plans, although Tokyo made a quick recovery when Tanaka Kakuei went one step further by reestablishing diplomatic relations in 1972—seven years before the United States did. US presidents have strained relations on repeated occasions—Jimmy Carter's Korean Peninsula policy, Bill Clinton's trade policy with Japan, the impact on public opinion in Japan of US wars in Vietnam and Iraq, and Trump's callousness toward the alliance. At times, US overtures toward China have been the source of strain: Clinton joining with Jiang Zemin in criticizing Japan, some in the Bush administration in 2007–08 in leaning toward what was seen as a Chinese approach toward North Korea while faulting Japan for holding back, and the sense that Obama was so keen about working with China that he ignored Japan's desire for a tougher response to increasing Chinese assertiveness. Yet, most of these same presidents later changed course to reinforce the alliance. Japanese prime ministers such as Suzuki Zenko at the start of the 1980s and Hatoyama three decades later were also seen as straining the alliance. Ups and downs occurred, but none seriously shook the

relationship or left it vulnerable to China's wedge-driving inclinations. Overcoming Trump, the relationship never was on more secure footing than through the early 2020s under Biden.

Japanese boosters of the alliance have not been limited to bilateralism. Nakasone not only made a huge impact on Japan-US relations, but he also reached out in a big way to Hu Yaobang to upgrade ties and began the process of reconciliation with Mikhail Gorbachev. Hashimoto Ryutaro was next in line in alliance strengthening, while he energetically pursued Boris Yeltsin and also strove to repair ties, even to Jiang after the downturn in the mid-90s. Koizumi kept visiting the Yasukuni Shrine to China's anger, but he showed no animus toward working with China, albeit he put Russian ties at risk. Abe made a breakthrough with Hu Jintao in 2006, and when he returned to office, he patiently awaited an opening with Xi, while vigorously wooing Putin. The pursuit of three goals at once proved challenging: a "normal Japan" on history and security, a closer US alliance, and a return to Asia on the basis of these two conditions. The third objective was not prioritized over the other two, frustrating wedge-drivers in China as well as Russia and many in South Korea too.

If some Japanese were nervous when Trump seemed to cozy up to Xi in 2017 and some Americans had doubts when Abe held a cordial summit with Xi in 2018 after first agreeing to cooperate conditionally with China's BRI, these moves came with strong reassurances to each other. In place of TPP or its successor after the US pulled away, the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" was more explicitly centered on security. US officials had no doubt about Abe's commitment to this idea. Developmental assistance was now being coordinated in support of security objectives. Biden could build on the FOIP confident of Japan's full backing.

## Strategic Threat

Never since the US occupation of Japan have Japanese or Americans in sizable numbers seen the other country as a strategic threat. Japanese have feared entrapment, becoming a pawn drawn into an ill-advised US war or strategic confrontation. They have also feared abandonment, being left to fend for themselves by a US pullback from Asia or a US deal with China that leaves the latter the dominant regional power ready to intensify its pressure on Japan as a regional rival and target of historical vindication. Yet, US diplomats such as Edwin Reischauer, Mike Mansfield, and Rich Armitage offered reassurances at critical moments in the history of the alliance. More often slight snags have occurred due to accidents, US insensitivity, or Japanese oversensitivity, in which feelings needed to be soothed. These did not, however, pose a strategic threat to Japan.

Japanese attitudes toward China have veered from underplaying any strategic threat from China to showcasing it. During the Cultural Revolution, the progressive media in Japan downplayed any threat. In the period after the normalization of relations in 1972, a romantic image of China and ties between China and Japan was ascendant until 1989 and had a lingering impact in the 1990s. Yet, the China threat theory had some persistent advocates as well as growing credibility after 1989 and especially from 2011, when

contestation over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands became an armed standoff. The pro-Taiwan lobby, the rearmament lobby, and the advocates of satisfying US calls for Japan to do more for its own and regional defense all were attentive to China's strengthened military prowess. The message seeped down to public opinion generally that not only was China a potential threat due to its rapid military buildup with a maritime orientation, but its special animus toward Japan, its intention to retake Taiwan, and its apparent aspirations for a Sinocentric region also posed direct challenges to Japanese security. Even when steps were taken to ameliorate bilateral tensions, the underlying attitude remained concern over a loss of regional stability that had favored Japan since the end of the Korean War. The US alliance became even more vital.

Security perceptions in Japan cannot be characterized as normal over much of the postwar era, as their abnormality had contributed to ill-fated decisions to go to war in the 1930s–40s. From the 1950s, a pacifist streak had kept an extraordinary hold on the public. This was accompanied by idealism about some sort of internationalism championed by Japan and even the possibility of a neutral or even balancing role in great power relations. A related source of idealism has been Asianism, as if Japan can play an instrumental if not a leadership role in resolving security issues in East Asia by capitalizing on goodwill to it or economic clout or even shared values. China was the beneficiary of such idealistic leanings, reflecting Japanese skepticism that US policies toward it were too hard-line and too misinformed by a lack of understanding of Asian ways of thinking.

China was alternating between biding its time toward Japan and demonizing its “militarism.” Japan was beset by idealism, obscuring at times strong aspirations in ruling circles for “normal” defense behavior. The United States vacillated between alarm about China's military upsurge and wishful thinking about avoiding the trap of a rising hegemon clashing with the present one. Signs were growing that this combination could not be sustained. China pressed into the South China Sea for full control after building artificial islands and arming them. Japan grew alarmed by Chinese encroachments around the East China Sea islands. The United States promised to “pivot” its military to the region as it faulted China for abetting North Korea's nuclear threat. Things came to a head in 2018, compounded by economic tensions. The Japan-US leg was secure, driven by security most of all, and China's legs of the triangle had atrophied beyond any repair.

The security triangle was a full-fledged marriage between Washington, no longer hesitant in its resolve to retain military supremacy and stand up to China's buildup and bullying, and Tokyo, much less concerned about entrapment than abandonment as it assumed more alliance duties. The structure of the security triangle had clearly been set, reflected in a deepening arms race. This balance only tilted further to the US-Japan dyad in the war environment of 2022.

## **Economic Vulnerability**

Sino-Japanese relations had long been called “politics cold, economics hot.” Their economic ties had seemed impervious to tensions over history and security. As talk began of

“decoupling” the US and Chinese production chains but not economic ties in general, Japanese companies were also making some moves in that direction. Economics stopped being “hot” in the 2010s, but the two economies were even more intertwined than the US and Chinese ones, making “cold” trade and investment ties an unlikely option. With limited decoupling underway, levels of mutual vulnerability remained high. Having a bigger economy after surpassing Japan’s in 2010, China may have appeared less vulnerable to economic cooling and, especially, economic pressure. It was a proposition that few wanted to test at a time of slowdown in China’s economic growth and continued shakiness after what had been viewed as prolonged stagnation in Japan’s economy.

China’s drive for catching up economically has since 1978 played the most decisive role in this triangular framework. Deng Xiaoping recognized that this would be a lengthy process, requiring Japanese know-how, ODA, and investments on a massive scale and, no less, requiring support from the United States, including full access to the US market so vital in all of the East Asian “economic miracles.” Until at least the 2008 world financial crisis, China was fully conscious of its greater economic vulnerability in comparison to its two leading economic partners. Critical in the Asian financial crisis a decade earlier was optimism that China had enough leverage to play an important role in the recovery of Southeast Asian countries and in the aftermath of 2008 the rising confidence that Beijing could use economic interdependency to influence relations with the entire world, including briefly withholding rare earth mineral exports to Japan and dangling threats before the states caught between US and Chinese wrangling over the South China Sea.

The situation evolved into mutual vulnerability. In the “trade war” from 2018, Trump calculated that China was more vulnerable because its exports to the United States were roughly four times its imports. Sanctions on ever-larger amounts of exports endangered China’s targeted growth rates and its ambitious plans to gain global leadership in artificial intelligence and other high-tech sectors by 2025. China’s targeted retaliatory sanctions failed to undercut Trump’s political base, especially in agricultural states. Yet, China could exact much greater pain if it decided that a deal could not be cut that would stem the bleeding at a bearable cost. US vulnerability was not yet at a level that China could gain the upper hand. At the same time, Xi benefited from the fact that Trump had not marshaled multilateral pressure, and he renewed summitry with Abe with economic cooperation in the foreground within months of the onset of the “trade war.”

The US-Japan alliance is intensifying its pushback against China, but the situation in economics is more complicated. At a time of increased US sanctions pressure on China, Japan proved that it was amenable to upgrading economic cooperation with China. Yet, there are also joint actions to reduce Chinese violations of the norms of international trade. Economic triangularity involves both two against one to reaffirm the rules, as in the original plan for TPP before Trump pulled out and Japanese firms producing in China keen on not falling victim to US efforts to cut the trade deficit with China and cognizant of similar US efforts to address the Japan-US deficit. The economic triangle is more complex than either the security one or the national identity one. Yet increased awareness of economic security threats and vulnerability is unmistakable in the 2020s.

The main thrust of the US response in Asia in 2022 to Russian aggression was to double down on economic security, cutting off Russia and denying it future access to vital inputs and finances. Given Chinese economic support for Russia, as for North Korea, as it geared up for reminders of its threat potential, the responses taken to Russia had spillover effects. Striking, despite its worry about the impact on the vast Sino-Japanese commerce, was Japan's active embrace of economic security measures. Still, tests awaited on how much pressure would be applied against China.

### National Identity Incompatibility

China's narratives about Japan and the United States showcased the symbols of its national identity exclusivity. Japan was often accused of "remilitarization," regardless of how fast the Sino-Japanese gap in defense spending was favoring China. Chinese sought to remind the world of wartime Japan as if the postwar commitment to peace meant little. In turn, Japanese came not only to remind the world of the premodern, Sinocentric order, diminishing the sovereignty and rights of neighboring states but also of the fearsome image of the communist past. The United States went further in its imagery of an authoritarian state committing genocide against Uighurs, reneging on promises toward Hong Kong, and undermining democracies. In the case of China's symbols, they demonized the United States with no regard for the truth, as in 2022, charges about biological weapons labs repeated the false accusations of Russia in its war in Ukraine.

Three national identity gaps can be clearly discerned: the Sino-US gap with democracy and human rights in the foreground of what increasingly is an ideological clash; the Sino-Japanese gap with history foremost, although ideology is becoming more prominent; and the US-Japanese gap, once associated with the vertical dimension of national identity but sporting elements of ideology and history on the Japanese side. These gaps have been present since before the end of the Cold War, but they have shifted significantly over time. Triangular dynamics would be hard to grasp clearly without consciousness of how the gaps have been shifting, especially under the leaders most obsessed with reconstructing national identity: Xi, Abe, and Trump. While any of these leaders could tone down the rhetoric on the others with an immediate impact (e.g., Trump veered from warm statements about Abe and Xi to his legacy of hostile thinking toward Japan from the 1980s and especially to demonization of China, reflected in the October 2019 Mike Pence speech), they were more inclined to perceive bilateral relations in zero-sum terms, at least as far as identity is concerned. "America First," the "China Dream," and a "normal Japan" all defied the logic of multilateralism on terms that would be reassuring to the countries most affected.

Trump could never be called a unifier—at home or abroad. As an avowed nationalist, he has a divisive outlook on American society and the world, rallying his base without any interest in appealing for common ground to others. Although he accepted Abe's concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," he was loath to elaborate on the values that unite Washington and Tokyo. Both on security and on

trade, Japan was viewed as treating the United States unfairly, as if its values were not to build trust but to seek only advantages for itself. This outlook left no room for shared values. A similar viewpoint applied to China, whose increasingly abusive treatment of minorities and oppressive control over information would ordinarily have aroused a sharp values-laden US response. Yet, beyond Trump, that reaction was building in US policy circles, fueling a deeper sense of confrontation and putting a brake on what Trump might seek to accomplish through a transactional approach, his sympathy for dictators and unconcern about human rights beclouded the message about a national identity gap with what was clearly the foremost US adversary.

Xi also was prone to underplay the demonization of the United States and Japan present in Chinese policy circles and publications. He presented himself as the statesman ready to meet with Trump and receive him with all due respect and, finally, in October 2018 to host Abe with warmth rather than the undisguised arrogance that had preceded. Xi, however, oversaw identity reconstruction that had treated Washington as a hegemonic power with few redeeming virtues and Japan under Abe as determined to revert to militarism and behavior akin to the war era. The national identity gaps with the United States and especially Japan had been widened in the 1990s, further expanded after 2008, and at their zenith in the attacks on Obama's "rebalance to Asia," and Abe's views of history and collective self-defense. Xi could turn down the spigots of blame on the occasion of summit meetings, but that did not reverse the prevailing accusatory tone.

Abe had pursued a three-part agenda on national identity. First, he had been determined to alter Japan's identity from postwar passivity and "masochism" toward its own history to pride and rejection of further apologies over the war era that narrow the identity gaps with neighbors at the expense of Japanese self-confidence. He went further in his embrace of the symbols of approval of the war era as seen in China and South Korea. Second on Abe's agenda was to narrow the identity gap with the United States, on which he made progress with visits to Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor with Obama, as well as by taking a more proactive stance on the spread of democracy and values long associated with US foreign policy. Third, Abe challenged China on values more openly than had previous Japanese prime ministers, appealing to countries in Southeast Asia as elsewhere to reject a lack of transparency and habits of corruption in Chinese projects offered to them. While in the late 1980s and early 1990s Japan had been perceived as cautious about reviving divisive historical images, wily about disassociating itself from the United States in its appeal to Asian values, and inclined to keep viewing China more as sharing traditional Confucian values than as communist, the identity gaps embedded in these themes had shifted considerably by the 2020s.

If at some point the Japanese had explored ideas about an "East Asian community" or even Asian values, later hesitating to forcefully criticize China for human rights, by 2022, their language was similar to that of the United States, acknowledging an enormous identity gap with China, long after the Chinese had been asserting their view of a vast gap with Japan and later the United States.

## Dynamics of the Japan-US-South Korea East Asian Triangle

China's rise will continue, economically even if slowed, militarily bound to be alarming, and as a champion of a rival civilization with growing ideological impact. Trade deals, arms control and confidence-building measures, and carefully orchestrated summits to suggest goodwill may leave an impression of a different triangle, but the basic framework is increasingly obvious. Tokyo is desperate for Washington to not abandon it to Beijing; Washington needs Tokyo to counter its adversary and is concerned that Japan's weakness will make that difficult; Beijing stands no chance of cutting a deal with Washington at Tokyo's expense or tearing Tokyo away from its ally. The security foundation for this type of triangular configuration will solidify, as the military buildups in the region only accelerate. The economic foundation will grow more apparent as the US and Japanese sides decouple from China to a degree, especially in dual-use and high-tech fields. Most conspicuous will likely be the widening national identity gaps with China that will follow and the concomitant narrowing of the US-Japan identity gap, which is already quite small.

The Trump era was an anomaly in some respects and an accelerator of ongoing trends in others. Its unilateralism and failure even to distinguish allies from challengers in trade policy tested Japan's patience. Its indifference to international institutions and values gave Abe reason to try to fill the vacuum. Yet, Trump's urgency in facing China's economic transgressions and push to build up the US military, including its weight in the Indo-Pacific region, were interpreted as reassurances in Japan. There was more willingness to give Trump the benefit of the doubt in Japan than in nearly any other US ally, but Biden dispelled doubts that Democrats are weak.

Abe was keen on leaving a legacy, reflecting his family's aspirations as leaders in Japan across all decades from the 1950s to the 2020s. They had boosted the alliance with the United States from Prime Minister Kishi's willingness to sacrifice his tenure as prime minister for passage of the security treaty in 1960 to Prime Minister Sato Eisaku's success in securing the return of Okinawa, although he was left clinging to a limb that was sawed off when Nixon made an abrupt turn from support for Taiwan as the authentic voice of China to a breakthrough with the PRC. As a foreign minister and expected future prime minister until illness cut short his career, Abe's father faced the challenge of the last stage of the Cold War, propping up US relations when Washington was out in front on Soviet relations while failing in his own pursuit of Moscow. In Abe Shinzo's policies, we observe the familiar pattern of boosting security ties to Washington while striving to make the alliance more equal through both shifts in Japan's security posture and more autonomy in foreign policy in Asia. By the 2020s, autonomy had lost to the urgency of a tighter alliance. Abe's primary legacy was not narrow nationalism but alliance solidarity.

China has long been the driving force in East Asia, as Washington and Tokyo kept seeking its cooperation on bilateral and triangular models of regional cooperation that it declined to accept. Others have had to respond to it: in security in the South and East China seas, in economics as China's growth and policies have reshaped regional trade and investment, and in identity given the Chinese barrage of attacks against their

reputed values and also its appeals for an exclusive community of common destiny led by China. Xi's assertiveness on all three scores has made China an even more powerful driving force. His tenure without term limits means that long after Trump departed and Abe left office in 2021, Xi is expected to steer China toward his goals.

The Japan-US-China triangle weathered some challenges over three decades, but it ended as it began with a strong alliance, no sustained efforts by China to drive a wedge between the other two, and considerable Japan-US coordination in dealing with China. Tokyo tried on multiple occasions to alter triangular dynamics. It aspired to be the pivot by boosting ties to the PRC when Sino-US ties flagged. It even aspired to East Asian regionalism acting as a proxy for the United States. There was talk of China becoming the gateway to long-sought Asianism. Yet China rebuffed Japan's aspirations, disregarding soft power and ignoring reactions to its threatening behavior. In the end, Tokyo's quest for more autonomy from Washington could not be satisfied by ties to China.

Bipolarity reinforced Japan's strategic shift in the 2010s to solidify the alliance with the United States as the way to check Chinese aggressive tendencies and to develop triangular and in one case quadrangular ties in Asia. At times, Tokyo did not coordinate, as in its wooing of Moscow. At other times, it took the lead when it thought Washington was lagging, as in overtures to New Delhi. It embraced a Japan-US marriage and stood firm against China while recognizing the value of summitry to calm tensions and make the most of already extensive economic ties. In the 2020s, summitry with China had lost its appeal, while Japan-US solidarity was being prioritized.

The US-Japan marriage had its ups and downs, but it was the most stable force of the post-Cold War era. Each side grew wary at times of the other's overtures to China, but the alliance was never shaken. It became the driving force in refocusing triangularity around this close dyad and then resisting the China-led forces trying to drive wedges in US alliances and partnerships. As bipolarity advances, this dyad anchors one side in the Indo-Pacific.

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## JAPAN, THE UNITED STATES, RUSSIA

### The Test for Boundary Crossing

As forces building toward two antagonistic camps in Asia advanced, there was one desperate attempt to buck the tide through reconciliation of the principal partners of both the US and China. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, from the time he returned to the top post in 2012, persistently wooed President Vladimir Putin, meeting with him repeatedly and insisting that their personal chemistry would be the driver toward a breakthrough to a peace treaty that had eluded Moscow and Tokyo since normalization of relations in 1956. These overtures occurred despite the sharp deterioration in Russo-US relations, especially from 2014, and the accelerated improvement in Sino-Russian relations, which Abe sought to forestall. The triangle with the US sheds light on Tokyo's efforts to play the pivot and demonstrate its autonomy despite the futility of Abe's diplomacy with Putin.

During the Cold War, the Japan, Soviet Union, US triangle was more interesting than observers acknowledged, and in the following three decades, it tantalized those who followed it even if the fundamental nature of the triangle remained quite constant. This triangle served as the principal testing ground for the US-Japan alliance across the early decades of the Cold War. It became a test too of US-Japan coordination in managing the end of the Cold War and its aftermath. Then it acquired new significance, serving as the key indicator: of Russia's seriousness about prioritizing multipolarity in its "Turn to the East" and of Japan's search to avoid Sinocentric regionalism by finding ways of balancing China in Asia. The prevailing dynamics remained US interest in close ties with Japan with both keeping Moscow at a distance, Japan's interest in showing a measure of autonomy from its great dependence on the United States while gaining leverage in Asia, and Moscow's interest in weakening the US-Japan alliance and strengthening its presence in a region far from the capital but vital to the Russian Far East. While some may be reminded of a broken record in the repeated, abortive efforts to find a breakthrough between Tokyo and Moscow, the repetition of this endeavor is testimony enough to the high stakes present in the triangular relationship.

The stakes were high, but the possibilities remained much more limited than strong advocates of change in this triangle imagined, even as they feigned to be in pursuit of rather limited objectives. In Moscow, two goals were paramount at times of its occasional Cold War entertainment of the idea of a breakthrough with Tokyo: massive Japanese investment in the Russian Far East and Siberia and weakening of the US-Japan alliance. When Boris Yeltsin welcomed Japan's attention in the late 1990s, Putin offered new hope to Japan in 2001–2, and Putin reciprocated Abe's eager pursuit of him in 2012–17, these aims again took priority. For Tokyo, there were more varied aims: recovery of four islands lost to Soviet forces after Japan had announced its surrender in 1945 was primary, access to natural resources was appealing for a time, and geostrategic goals associated with boosting great power autonomy and driving a wedge between Russia and China were objectives as well. US ambitions were narrower, mostly defensive in keeping the other two sides of the triangle apart but briefly in the early 1990s trying to narrow their distance in hopes of using Japan to reinforce the collective effort to steer Russia into the US-led world community. At no point did Russia take Japan seriously enough to offer incentives capable of getting it to think a lot about cutting a deal with triangular implications nor did Japan look far beyond the islands in a manner to put its US alliance at risk. Washington did little more than stifle slight annoyance. If Abe and Putin recommitted to striking a deal in 2019, there was scant hope of any breakthrough.

The significance of the Japan-Russia-US triangle is not what occurred to transform it but why so little happened given the potential value of a Japan-Russia breakthrough and the limitations due to the state of US-Russia and US-Japan relations. When Japan was still unsure of a commitment to an alliance with the United States, when Tokyo and Moscow saw the impact of the breakthrough between Beijing and Washington, when their relations were the last to improve as the Cold War was ending and just afterward, and when both were maneuvering to shape the new post-Cold War order in the region, they could have turned to each other. In seeking answers to what stymied their quest for normalization, we again look to strategic, economic, and national identity factors.

The Moscow-Tokyo leg of the triangle remained atrophied not only because of the stumbling block of a territorial dispute stemming from Soviet seizure of four islands after Japan had surrendered in 1945 and the much stronger pull each felt from its prime ally or quasi-ally but also because Moscow for reasons of security, identity, and even economic reasoning judged Tokyo to be more of a problem than an asset. Japanese overtures in the early 1970s, late 1980s, 1990s, and from 2012 were one-sided affairs without much reciprocity. The exception in 2001–2 saw Putin appear to agree to a two-island compromise, but Russian expectations for Japan did not drive the diplomacy. Moscow never recognized Tokyo as a vital partner to realize its goals. After Abe, Japan's hopes flickered before being extinguished by Russia's aggression in Europe.

### **Tests of Triangularity over Three Decades**

In the 1950s to mid-1970s, Tokyo appeared intermittently to be grasping for a way to normalize ties to Moscow: exploring in 1954–6 a compromise on the disputed

islands in return not only for Soviet agreement that Japan could enter the United Nations but one that could open the gates to less Japanese dependency on the United States at a time when uncertainty prevailed over a long-term security treaty, trying but failing to combine in 1960 approval of the security treaty with a peace treaty with Moscow resolving the territorial dispute, and exploring a massive investment program in Siberia and the Russian Far East in the early 1970s that would accompany at last the illusive territorial deal. While in the 1950s there was some US concern about Japan opting for neutrality in the Cold War or passivity to avoid entanglement, the concern shifted to Japan just keeping the United States at arm's length on security while reaching an economic arrangement with the Russians at odds with US policy. At a time of upheaval in international relations—break-throughs with China and European outreach to Russia in the spirit of *détente*—Japan's intentions were not clear. It had just negotiated the return of Okinawa, giving it more space to spurn US preferences.

From the late 1970s to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tokyo was a hard-line influence on policy toward the Soviet Union, welcoming the United States' staunch stance in response to Moscow's invasion of Afghanistan and reacting with suspicion to Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush when they grew chummy with Mikhail Gorbachev. While the focus in its narratives was the refusal of Moscow to return four islands, exploratory diplomacy revealed doubts that Moscow was really committed to ending the Cold War in Asia, prioritizing a new relationship with Tokyo. Triangularity became more pronounced in the 1980s because Japan had gained confidence as an economic great power able to pursue a more assertive foreign policy, Washington was seeking first a greater Japanese commitment to containment of the Soviet Union and then Japanese support for the economic carrots to ease Moscow's path to reconciliation. Moscow, however, did not take Japan seriously despite entertaining thoughts about attracting its money. Schemes to essentially buy the islands or appeal to the United States and other G7 states to condition support to Moscow on their return overplayed Tokyo's hand as its relations with Moscow drifted through the mid-1990s.

The 1990s appeared to be conducive to strengthening the Moscow-Tokyo leg of the triangle.

Moscow's foreign policy vacillated more than in any other period. Tokyo was optimistic about its ability to impact foreign relations more than in any other period. Finally, Washington was most focused on forging a new world order with great power relations at the forefront. The ups and downs of the bilateral relations comprising this triangle drew unprecedented fanfare. By 1995, however, Russo-US relations had begun their downswing; US-Japan relations were being stabilized after tensions centered on trade; Russo-Japan relations had reached an impasse even if Japanese diplomats thought that they had cornered Moscow with the Tokyo Declaration of 1993 naming all four islands as if that meant that a weak Yeltsin would negotiate over them.

More modest Japanese diplomatic overtures to Russia from 1997 to 2002 and more constrained US expectations toward Russia suggested that this triangle could become a stabilizing influence in the Asian region. The Japanese appeared ready to

compromise on the islands; after new tensions with Russia over Kosovo, the United States lowered its aspirations; Russians through Putin's first two years as president encouraged the Japanese while anticipating working with the US side, especially after the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States. Optimism about the triangle seemed possible, but it was strained. Putin was more interested in boosting ties to North Korea, as well as China for geopolitical influence, and Japanese conservatives balked at a deal bringing only two islands. If economic benefits again raised hope, security and especially national identity stood in the way.

Three new leaders altered the dynamics of the Japan–Russia–US triangle in 2002–3. Koizumi Junichiro reversed Japan's negotiating posture to Moscow, abandoning the Irkutsk agreement of early 2002 and setting back relations for more than a decade. Would the agreement have led to the resolution of the territorial dispute, a peace treaty, and substantial change in Japan–Russian ties? There is ample reason to doubt that, given the clashing expectations of the two parties rooted in national identities that were becoming more assertive after a decade's hiatus and the priorities of Putin and Koizumi for strategic relations with China and the United States, respectively. Putin in 2003–4 sharply shifted course in opposition to US policies in Iraq and in Ukraine, above all. As in the Gorbachev era, Russians saw some economic value in reaching a deal with Japan, but there was little payoff foreseen for strategic and national identity objectives. Finally, there was George W. Bush, who disregarded Russian concerns with scant effort to find common ground and lost interest in encouraging a Japan–Russia rapprochement. Russo–US relations were soon on a rapid downward slope, while the US–Japan alliance was strengthened, and Japan–Russia ties stagnated.

The pattern taking shape from 2002 prevailed until 2012. Barack Obama sought a reset with Russia, and one or another Japanese leader looked to reopen talks, but little changed except for the 2009–10 Japan–US tensions under Hatoyama Yukio. When Abe returned to the top position at the end of 2012, he was determined to change that. Defiant of the worsening dynamic in Russo–US relations and of Putin's intensification of national identity after his return to the presidency in a manner that made territorial compromise less likely, Abe attempted the most fundamental restructuring of the triangle acknowledged since the early 1990s. While presenting his overtures to public opinion as aimed at the recovery of islands for national identity purposes and suggesting to the Russian side that economic interests would make this worthwhile, Abe's thinking was increasingly clarified as strategic in orientation. In one interpretation, he was trying to drive a wedge between Russia and China. In another, he was more realistic that this goal was not within reach and was preemptively seeking to avoid Russia joining China in pressuring Japan over both security and history. Either way, the Japanese could present Abe's moves as in the United States' interest too, arguing that Moscow's actions in other regions, including its aggression in Ukraine, were separate from its interests in Asia in keeping a balance of power rather than allying with China. This proved a hard sell to the United States.

In November 2018, Putin and Abe agreed on essentially a return to the Irkutsk framework, not enough for a breakthrough but a starting point that had been elusive

for 16 years. One new twist was Putin's clear insistence that on the two small islands to eventually be returned to Japan no US troops could be stationed. The US treaty obligation is to defend all territory administered by Japan, including the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands, so further clarification was necessary. Upbeat summitry, however, could not overcome Russian dismissal of the national identity basis for any deal and obsession with the security clash with the United States and its ally. Economics mattered little.

In the early 2020s, the US-Japan marriage drew even closer, and both countries' ties to Russia sank further. Abe's departure led to a loss of Japanese interest after repeated Russian snubs. In turn, the Russian side resorted to warnings rather than inducements. The "honeymoon" period had been a façade, but now the divorce was turning bitter, as Russia revived the playbook of the pre-Gorbachev decade of demonizing Japan and refusing to negotiate without full capitulation. The triangle had reverted to the state of the late Cold War, leaving Moscow a contented pariah. After Japan joined sanctions over the Ukraine war, Russia called it an "unfriendly country."

### Strategic Threat

Japan was slow to take the Soviet threat seriously enough to boost the alliance and make its own substantial defensive measures. In the 1980s, some on the right sensationalized the threat, while the pacifist majority remained rather aloof. Strategic concerns played a minor role in the 1990s and 2000s in diplomacy toward Moscow, although they were increasingly a factor in relations with Washington and Beijing. Moscow, in turn, dismissed Tokyo's strategic significance. To the extent the strategic factor operated, it was between Washington and Moscow with Tokyo left as a state cautious about defying its ally and Moscow dismissive of Tokyo as an independent actor.

What altered the strategic triangle in the 1990s was Moscow's sharply reduced threat capacity and behavior and in the 2010s Moscow's revived threat capacity both on its own and through close ties to Beijing. Washington and Tokyo differed importantly in responding in stages from 2012 to 2019. First, Tokyo was more alarmed about Beijing and less about Moscow than was Washington, but the differences were not so great that it became a thorn in the alliance. Then, Washington grew much more alarmed about Moscow, given its belligerence and the tensions over Ukraine and Syria, while Abe intensified his wooing of Putin and his disappointment over Washington's lack of strategic understanding of why this was necessary in light of a rising China threat. Finally, in 2018 under Trump, Washington toughened its stance toward Beijing, while Putin made it clear to Abe that in his policies toward China, North Korea, and a military buildup on the disputed islands he was not amenable to finding common ground. The triangle resembled once again what it had been in the Cold War era—Moscow was rapidly boosting its military and disregarding Japan's concerns while treating Washington as the enemy; Washington was seeking a closer alliance with Tokyo with Moscow one target; Tokyo was making advances in both collective defense and missile defense, and then the Ukraine war made the Cold War a reality.

Putin's conflictual image of the United States and its alliances doomed diplomacy even before his invasion of Ukraine led to G7 sanctions, which Abe felt compelled to join. Russian forays forcing Japan's jets to scramble heightened the tension. Perceived security threats cast a shadow on relations.

With Biden in office and Abe retired, Trump's indifference to Japan's wooing of Russia gave way to a clearer strategic vision and coordination on regional threats. Closer Sino-Russian ties and Japan-US ties did not leave any room for pretenses about Russo-Japan diplomatic progress.

Security drove Abe to seek a way to deter Russia's embrace of China, and it drove Putin to scorn Japan's interest as failing to undermine the Japan-US alliance. Abe flew in the face of advice that he was underestimating the strength of Sino-Russian relations and Putin's animus toward the United States. For Putin, the pull of China kept growing, leading him to treat Japan with increasing derision. Only in 2022 did Japan respond in kind due to Russia's aggression.

## **Economic Vulnerability**

The Soviet Union was relatively invulnerable to outside economic pressure, and after allowing itself to become highly vulnerable in the 1990s during a difficult transition when energy prices were low, Russia had again reduced its exposure to international pressure, taking advantage of higher energy prices. Japan lacks economic leverage over it, but the United States by applying sanctions with partners in Europe had caused some pain since Russia seized Crimea in 2014 and in response to other serious violations of international norms. Yet, Russia's energy exports have provided a comfortable cushion, as Europe keeps the pipelines flowing, and China offers growing markets. Until Trump imposed sanctions on Japanese steel and aluminum, along with sanctions on others, there was no attention to Japan's vulnerability to the United States, despite memories of trade tensions in the late 1980s and early 1990s. US vulnerability to Russia and Japan has not been a concern, and energy dependency declined quickly in the 2010s with the shale revolution.

European vulnerability to Russia cutting off gas supplies has no parallel in these bilateral ties apart from Russia's case from the 1990s and the possibility that US leverage over the world's financial system being wielded increasingly in the 2010s would be extended to Russia. Indeed, Moscow has been trying to work out arrangements to stop using the dollar in its trade, seeking an arrangement with Beijing to kick off this process. This was a matter more for another triangle.

While fear of economic vulnerability has remained well in the background and security threats have often been less than the Russian side has suggested, economic ties have been hampered by national identity divisions. Moscow sought large-scale Japanese investment in the Russian Far East and succeeded in the early 1970s in getting some, leading to coal exports, and again in the 1990s in securing funds for Sakhalin oil and gas development and exports to Japan. Yet, there was much greater potential for Japan, heavily reliant on natural resource and energy imports, and Russia, long intent on developing the infrastructure for exporting the very items

sought by Japan, to take advantage of their economic complementarity. Moscow reminded Tokyo of this on many occasions, but it failed to offer the incentives needed and to assuage identity concerns. Tokyo at times held economics hostage to the resolution of the Northern Territories' questions and at other times did not consider the risks, owing to Russia's economic policies and lack of investment in its own Far East infrastructure, worth the effort by its companies, or they balked due to these. On both sides, there was a persistent assumption that security tensions could be ameliorated and new economic ties forged if only they could get beyond the exasperating hurdle of national identities.

Avoidance of economic vulnerability has often been a concern in the Japan-Russia-US triangle. Japan faced warnings around 1970 that it could become dependent on Soviet energy supplies if plans under discussion materialized. As Russians in the 2010s proposed a pipeline from Sakhalin to Hokkaido, this issue resurfaced. Imports of Sakhalin LNG did not raise that risk. Investments into Russia posed a risk as well, possibly becoming subject to political pressure and insufficient protection by the rule of law. Of course, Russia was keen to avoid exposure to US pressure, even more so as sanctions were being applied from 2014. Trump's unilateral "America First" actions gave the Japanese a scare that they could be vulnerable to US pressure. On the whole, however, the question of economic vulnerability has remained a sideshow in the triangle to security or identity. Still, Japan showed Russia it was vulnerable by joining in tough sanctions in 2022.

## National Identity Incompatibility

Two symbols overwhelmed others in the Japan-Russia relationship: the "Northern Territories," referring to "inherent territory" of Japan "stolen" after it surrendered in 1945, and the "Great Patriotic War," for which the glorious victory must not be "overturned" as Japan sought in its territorial demands. If Russia appeared for a time to spare Japan its demonization of the United States as an ideological threat to peace, and Japan hesitated to join US charges against Russian moves in Ukraine and authoritarianism, in 2022, there were no such qualms.

The national identity gap between Tokyo and Moscow has been the bane of their relationship, obscuring the importance of strategic threats and interfering with behavior in response to their economic complementarity. Some say it is ingrained in their history—the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, which Stalin interpreted as a stain on Russia's history that had to be wiped clean, and the Soviet seizure of four islands from Japan in 1945, which Japanese have been obsessed with recovering as reflected in the hoopla over "Northern Territories Day" for nearly 40 years. The two sides traded territory in treaties that were memorialized as just or unfair, leaving stark symbols for future generations. In the post-Cold War era, each has made treatment of World War II the touchstone of reconstructing identity, directly at odds with the other's verdicts. Moscow prizes military prowess, arrogantly looking down on Japan, while Tokyo looks more through a prism of technological finesse and playing by the rules, which clashes with its impressions of Russians.

The resurgent Japanese national identity places a high premium on history, long nurtured by the vilification of Soviet occupation of islands deemed inherently Japanese. When doubts about the reconstruction of identity around the conservatives' narrative were still pronounced in the early 1980s, the "Northern Territories" were showcased as the symbol of historical injustice. In these circumstances, the Japanese were hamstrung in compromising with Moscow first under Gorbachev, when boosters of national identity insisted on the "entry approach," agreement on the return of all four islands before Japan could make concessions on economic assistance and investment. Again, when Yeltsin's foreign policy team was eager for a quick compromise, the response was inflexible, even if the timing of the turnover of the islands was soon to be treated as long after the demarcation occurred. Finally, Putin's rise to power led to new pragmatism on the part of Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro before national identity boosters blocked movement with the demand of "four islands in a batch." Negotiations over the exact terms of what was expected to be "two islands + alpha" would likely have proven difficult on these occasions, but Tokyo could never get to that point because a vocal part of the public had become wedded to the symbol of the dispute with Moscow to such a degree they could not focus on the broader implications of a deal. Only Abe was able to shift the national identity rhetoric to allow room for a long-missing compromise.

National identity first in the Soviet Union and then in the successor Russian state posed a hurdle of similar magnitude. Victory in World War II with its attendant gains in territory or sphere of influence acquired sacred significance. As a defeated power, Japan's arrogance to demand the return of the islands and even to insist on being treated as an equal due to its economic strength convinced few under the spell of national identity. It was dismissed as a state temporarily under the control of revanchists, which was ripe for class revolution, and later as a state unworthy of diplomacy for daring to demonize the mighty Soviet Union and strengthen its alliance with the United States. By viewing Japan through a hierarchical and identity lens, the Soviets cut themselves off from the dynamism of East Asia, whose regional rise was long dismissed as artificial and nefarious.

The national identity barrier to pursuing Japan endured under Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin in spite of obvious economic imperatives and possible strategic benefits. Gorbachev delayed any outreach to Japan not only because he saw that country fixated on the territorial issue but also because he knew that his domestic opponents would jump on him if he tried to tackle the issue of a territorial deal. As his desperation for economic assistance mounted, he traveled to Japan too late in his leadership to be able to dismiss the backlash that would have ensued. Yeltsin only had a brief opening in 1992 for reaching a compromise on two islands before his opposition pounced on diplomacy with Japan as the first symbol of a foreign policy betrayal of Russian identity. As Yeltsin increasingly rested his survival in office on playing the national identity card, he had to balance his quest for economic support from the outside, including Japan, with the necessity of brandishing his patriotic credentials as the defender of the "Russian idea." That idea remained vague, but the defense of territorial integrity proved a big roadblock in dealings with Japan. Putin raised national identity to a higher pedestal after an early attempt to cut a deal over two islands,

leaving increasing doubt that compromise with Japan would be compatible with the growing glorification of World War II, the focus on China as an identity partner, and the vilification of the United States' role in the world, including the threat from its alliances. In 2013–16, Abe apparently thought that he was wooing a pragmatic Putin focused on economic uplifting of the Russian Far East and on strategic balancing against a rising China when Putin's identity obsession overwhelmed his plan.

Abe had the credibility on the right to sacrifice an established national identity objective of four islands for the lesser goal of two islands, which would suffice to claim an identity breakthrough in closing the book on the war era for a “normal” Japan. Putin's only identity goals associated with the revival of the Soviet legacy left no room for a territorial compromise. As Japan played down images of Russian human rights abuse and aggression that would have widened the identity gap, Russia evoked narratives of 1945 and efforts to overturn the results of the war to widen the gap. Post-Abe, Russia doubled down on this, while Japan became more forthright about Putin's ways. This was but a short prelude to intensified mutual charges in 2022.

### **Dynamics of the Japan-US-Russia Triangular Quest for Boundary Crossing**

In the era of détente and its lingering impact, the United States alternately pressed Japan to stand strongly against the Soviet Union or indicated that it would seek to promote accommodation with Moscow, even when Tokyo was cautious due to its widening identity gap with Moscow. As the Cold War ended and just after, the Japan-US gap widened in dealing with Moscow. The reset of the Obama administration with Moscow came when Russo-Japanese relations were showing no new life, while the wooing of Moscow by Abe came when Russo-US relations were facing big headwinds. US-Japanese coordination has proven challenging, while Moscow has often seemed more concerned about the daunting task of driving a wedge between the two allies than working with both to forge a triangle that would advance together. Putin appeared determined to proceed with driving a wedge while he denounced the alliance and tied his country ever closer to China.

As Sino-US relations increasingly point to a polarizing region, Japanese and Russian aspirations for maneuvering space were bound to be dashed. Tokyo's expectations peaked in the 1990s and have fallen. Moscow's kept mounting into the 2010s with no backing down in sight. Realizing a breakthrough in their bilateral relationship would be the most decisive step either could take to suggest that a pathway exists to multipolarity without overwhelming dependency on one state. To Moscow, however, this would mean breaking from Beijing to a degree few anticipate and reconciling with Washington enough to give Tokyo confidence that it could keep the alliance strong. Abe has been bolder in exploring ties with Putin with few demands beyond the symbolic recovery of two islands, while Putin complains of the Japan-US alliance and seeks an economic payoff while treading very carefully in veering from China's agenda. The ball is largely in his court to alter the Sino-Russia-US triangle as a prerequisite to transforming Russian ties to Japan.

As the image of “Vlad-Shinzo” bonhomie faded, this triangle reverted to its Cold War shape. A marriage of two allies stood opposed to a militarized power hostile to their security interests. As in the first Cold War, Tokyo maintained some independent diplomacy with Moscow, struggled to get its territorial claims on the agenda, and relied on the United States to keep threats in check. After it failed in its autonomous quest to steer Moscow onto a different path, it closed alliance ranks.

The challenge of transforming one triangle cannot be separated from that of transforming one or more others. Indeed, the socialist legacy triangles stand in the way of Japan’s ambitions to alter the triangle with Russia and the United States, in the process tweaking its alliance with the United States. Moscow in the 1990s made fundamental triangular changes, but the national identity rationale for them did not stick. Through the 2010s, it was again making fundamental triangular changes based on very different national identity assumptions but with little room for taking a new course with Japan.

Abe’s overtures to Russia compromised national identity—but not seriously—and promised real economic sweeteners—but far fewer than China was offering. He drew the line at compromising Japan’s alliance with the United States and security. He sought a deal that Russia had offered in 1992, was apparently ready to accept in 2001, and seemed to be consistent with Putin’s call for a “draw” to reach an agreement. Prime Minister Kishida Fumio apparently recognized that Putin had given his clear response and that Russo-US relations had fallen so far that no room was left to revive diplomacy. Polarization confirmed that the pursuit of Russia to cross boundaries was no longer a possibility. War in Europe left Japan fully on the US side, having lost hope for Russia.

Along with South Korean leaders who focused on China, Abe’s overtures to Putin tested whether bipolarity could be averted. One sought to keep China from a hostile outlook in support of North Korea, the other to restrain Russia from joining China against the United States and its allies. Many recognized the futility of these endeavors, which were pursued long after they had seemed all but pointless. The United States waited, boosting ties with both and finally with a sense of relief. Putin alienated Japan in his bilateral actions, his ties to China, and finally his aggression. No further moves away from bipolarity were likely to follow from Japan.

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## JAPAN, THE UNITED STATES, AUSTRALIA, INDIA

### The Quad—An Exception

A quadrangular partnership of Japan, the United States, Australia, and India is the most ambitious initiative to transform international relations in Asia, seeking a maritime coalition with security included. It is aspirational, building on ideas proposed by Abe Shinzo, and strengthened both by Donald Trump's endorsement and Joe Biden's summons to summitry from the start of his tenure. Unlike the triangles covered, bilateral differences have largely been limited to the urgency of steps to solidify the grouping and to the degree of acknowledgment of its *raison d'être* containing China's expansionism. If the 2021 AUKUS agreement with the United Kingdom and the United States to build nuclear submarines for Australia, warmly supported by Japan, demonstrated that three of the states were openly focused on defending against China, the Quad played down this goal for India's sake. Nontraditional security is in the forefront but economics and identity matter too.

Abe aspired to this quadrangular coalition; Trump seconded it while showing little interest in multilateralism; Biden fully embraced it, holding a virtual summit in March 2021 as his first diplomatic endeavor. In line with the virtual alliance of the US, Japan, and South Korea, this is an effort to establish a framework of security partners backed by commensurate national identity compatibility to counter China's expansionism and support the continued leadership role of the United States in the Indo-Pacific. Compared to the previously covered triangles, it has at least four distinctive characteristics that make it worthy of close scrutiny for the foreseeable future.

First, the Quad comprises four countries, stretching the triangular dynamics observed in the other cases. Instead of weighing the security interests and identity gaps of each country looking in two directions, a general security focus and identity theme become imperative to galvanize all parties. Second, after the United States took over the mantle of leadership from Japan, this Quad represented better than any of the triangles a single-minded agenda of creating a regional security system. If the United States has that in mind for the triangle with Japan and South Korea

too, South Korea remains hesitant to reach beyond a narrow alliance focused on the Korean Peninsula. In the case of the Quad, India is balking at attempts at a broad-based alliance, even if the US design for India centers on China.

Third, the Quad is already giving rise to talk of the Quad-Plus with an expanded membership or affiliations reaching to Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and Europe. If this hope for the Quad were to be realized, a kind of NATO of the East could develop, but that is now but a pipedream.

Finally, the Quad covers a geographical range far more expansive than any of the triangles—one never drawn together since World War II and capable of overwhelming the separate triangular forces. Thus, the Quad has different dynamics, could be the core of a US-led alliance network, is open to multiple new members, and transforms thinking on the geographical range of Asia's dynamism.

The Quad was late to emerge and has yet to reach at all close to its full potential. Abe's legacy includes his unswerving commitment to relations with India and this Quad. Five US presidents have played a role in boosting Indo-US ties to the start of the 2020s, accepting India as a nuclear power, engaging it on regional maritime security, tilting to it as Pakistan proved problematic, and shifting away from prior concepts of East Asia and the Asia-Pacific to conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific, culminating in vigorous leadership of multilateralism. As China's naval power has grown and turned increasingly to the Indian Ocean, states in the emerging Indo-Pacific coalition found that they had more in common, but for both economic and national identity reasons, as well as differing security priorities, they managed only gradually to recognize their joint potential. Xi Jinping's "wolf warrior" aggression in 2019–20—threats and sanctions targeted at Australia for daring to defy China and a military attack against India—drove the two most recalcitrant states to appreciate the need for the Quad, just as new US leadership awakened to its strategic urgency.

All the countries in the Quad had important adjustments to make. India had been inclined to see Pakistan as its overwhelming preoccupation and to remain focused on an autonomous foreign policy and national identity. Japan had difficulty moving beyond postwar pacifism and reliance on the United States to take care of security concerns beyond its immediate neighborhood. Australia was slow to recognize China as a threat rather than a source of tremendous economic opportunity. And the US effort to win its war in Afghanistan and serious distractions from the Middle East to North Korea limited its attention to both prioritizing India and preparing for the still somewhat distant Chinese naval advance into the Indian Ocean. China aroused the need to work together as a group. If US alarm about North Korea sucked the oxygen out of a broader, regional approach even when there was rhetoric to the contrary, and India's caution about "acting East" not just "turning East" in concert with other great powers left it a weak reed on which to forge action, Biden capitalized on shared growing apprehension of China to push for the Quad to be solidified.

Both Beijing and Moscow awakened late to the potential of this Quad and took actions to deny it from tightening to little avail. Beijing, to 2017, was heightening tensions with New Delhi, causing the border dispute to worsen, poaching the Maldives

for its own sphere of influence, and hurling divisive rhetoric. Moscow offended New Delhi by tilting sharply to China and selling arms to Pakistan. Yet Moscow has a long history of partnership with Delhi and remains an arms supplier. India is loath to alienate it, given its multidirectional approach and fear of a Sino-Russian alliance. This is one sign that India retains a cautious attitude toward US goals for the Quad.

If the Quad of the US-Japan-India-Australia began to seem like a foregone conclusion, three new developments led observers to raise doubts about that outcome. First, Trump was slow to show interest in India despite his decision in late 2017 to endorse Abe's label of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and the formal shift in the US regional framework from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. This gave impetus to Narendra Modi to look elsewhere, although later Modi and Trump struck a relationship that recognized the vanity of each. Second, as the world economy looked more uncertain, India put a higher priority on China. Third, China's alarm over the trade war Trump had unleashed led to some softness toward India and even Japan; restraint was short-lived.

There was frustration that India was slow to accept the Quad, rendering it an unrealized ideal. To Barack Obama, wooing India and the countries of Southeast Asia required subtlety, avoiding forcing a choice between China and the United States. Mike Pence in October 2018, however, went further, framing a stark choice between the two. Thus, US policy to the southern tier of Asia was at odds with the Trump approach in 2018 to North Korea, eschewing polarization and hoping to work with China. It lacked the subtlety sought by India, but China's aggression still opened the door to the Quad.

While there was pushback against the Quad framework in 2018, it still had ample reserves to go forward. Abe was keen, but Trump and Modi were preoccupied elsewhere, and Australia was just awakening to the extent of China's challenge. As Sino-US tensions mounted, diplomats explored ways to give substance to a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," which centered on the Quad.

Much changed over two years, particularly in 2020. Even so, the Quad is still at its inception with little clarity about its functions or its eventual scope. The limiting case is India, seemingly unsure of the security, economic, and identity reasons to pursue this grouping and strengthen it. The year 2020 was a turning point for India, and it is being tested under Biden, as the US-Japan alliance system is strengthening with a strong identity component. Sino-Indian relations have been and remain the key to the Quad's fate. Yet, even with this uncertainty, the prospect of a Quad-Plus is being actively discussed with US ally South Korea in the forefront. It is seen as a coalition of the willing for diverse functional roles, far from a security alliance.

The United States made its case to Seoul that while the immediate threat was Pyongyang, the long-term risk was Beijing. Seoul had been reminded of that risk with Beijing's harsh reaction to THAAD deployment, it had a values alignment with the Quad, and the Indian Ocean and South China Sea were a lifeline for it too. Strategic interests were in accord, as were values. The US message was not to let fixation on a narrow challenge lead to missing the big, regional one. After all, Beijing increasingly sees the Korean Peninsula, as well as Asia's southern tier, through the lens of a polarized geopolitical competition. If Beijing is making this

linkage between the two ends of Asia and will calibrate its policy to North Korea according to the overall context, why should Seoul not also take a broad perspective, boosting its US alliance ties through this initiative?

Moon Jae-in adopted the New Southern Policy as a way to become more active in Southeast Asia and India, seeking to keep the focus on prosperity, not peace. Seoul would take a complementary approach to the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” idea but avoid sensitive security positions that are opposed by Beijing. Pence’s framing of the challenge defied Moon’s intentions, adding to the widespread impression that Trump’s personalized diplomacy to the North was in contradiction to the line others in his administration were taking to China and possibly could be extended to the North should Trump lose interest in claiming a success. With no Trump interest in a vision for the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” there was uncertainty if Pence’s approach would be sustained.

Greater clarity was provided by the Biden administration with further interest in Seoul’s entrance.

Attention to Seoul’s reluctance is part of the discussion of a Quad-Plus. Seoul’s hesitation to join was tested by US efforts at the Moon-Biden summit to produce a supportive joint statement. It read that the two sides “acknowledge the importance of open, transparent, and inclusive regional multilateralism including the Quad.” This may clear the way for Moon’s successor to draw closer to the Quad, as the United States still seeks ROK involvement. As Yoon Suk-yeol readied to take office, he spoke optimistically about Seoul taking a more active role in the Quad.

## Tests of Triangularity over Three Decades

China’s advance into the Indian Ocean coupled with its aggressive behavior in the South China Sea put the spotlight on India, along with Australia, given the impotence of ASEAN. Without the label “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” there would still have been under TPP vigorous US pursuit of India and coordination with Japan, which had been cultivating close ties with Indian leaders and which had a similar outlook on what needed to be done. Appealing for ASEAN action on South China Sea security and China’s abuse of BRI for Sinocentrism, the allies were frustrated by claims of ASEAN centrality that let problems fester. The Quad became the desired alternative.

The failure of ASEAN to congeal versus China’s coercion has left a vacuum the Quad seeks to fill. The fear of US retrenchment has fueled the search for a mechanism to keep it engaged.

The Obama “pivot to Asia” did not suffice, nor did the Trump demonization of China without a multilateral strategy, which the Quad requires. After withdrawing from Afghanistan in August 2021, Biden was intent on redoubling US leadership in the Indo-Pacific, prioritizing the Quad.

While US and Japanese officials insist that the Quad is not eclipsing or undermining ASEAN and take pains to add, as Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin did in August 2021, that it will shore up respect for ASEAN, it is precisely the failings of ASEAN that has prompted the Quad to form. It has proven unable to achieve

unity in responding to Chinese aggression. Given the prevailing reticence to choose sides between the United States and China mixed with widespread support for the United States to be more active to counterbalance China, the message delivered by the Quad is not one of confrontation but one of preparedness to counter China while the door to China is left open.

The roots of the Quad go back to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, to which the US navy was well positioned to respond, winning the cooperation of Japan, Australia, and India. In his first stint as prime minister, Abe Shinzo just afterward pursued institutionalization of this grouping, but his successor Fukuda Yasuo lost interest, and the leaders of Australia, India, and even the United States hesitated to challenge China so directly. Back in power, Abe focused on boosting ties separately to India and Australia, as well as the United States, as China's behavior, especially in the South China Sea, aroused much greater concern than a decade earlier. Abe renewed his appeal for a quad, raising the idea of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," and invited officials of the four countries to meet in November 2017. Although Trump had pulled out of TPP, he echoed the FOIP theme. Foreign ministers met in 2019 and in October 2020, when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called for a "true security framework," expansion, and countering the challenge of the Chinese Communist Party.

In the summer of 2020, Australia clearly affirmed its support for FOIP, upgrading ties with India in one summit and affirming cooperation with Japan on behalf of FOIP in another. The weakest leg of the Quad had been the Australia-India one, so this milestone was important, reflecting the troubled state of both Australia-China and India-China relations after the border attacks in the Himalayas and the intensified Chinese economic coercion against the least populous and most vulnerable of the Quad participants. This was when the Quad became a reality, but it still needed determined, strategic leadership, which Biden began to provide shortly after his inauguration.

More than anything else, critiques of China's actions in the South China Sea aroused states to act. If this was not foremost in Indian thinking, it awakened others to the need for a more inclusive security framework. Only as Chinese aggression spread to India was the dye cast for the Quad. Yet, steeped in autonomy and wary of overtly challenging China, India did not prioritize security.

Biden prioritized the Quad and threw himself into diplomacy to give substance to it. Uncertain was how much trust he would win after the chaotic US retreat from Afghanistan and American political disarray had alarmed US allies and partners. Uncertain too was how Modi's mercurial drift to extreme nationalism and restrictive trade could be reconciled with Biden's agenda. The will of Japan's shifting post-Abe leadership and Australian leadership—earlier hesitant about Abe's Quad appeal—would be tested as well. Still, the concept filled an urgent and shared need. In 2022, India's refusal to criticize Putin's war in Ukraine dampened hopes for a vigorous Quad.

## Strategic Threat

China's aggressive behavior and language drove threat perceptions responsible for the birth of the Quad. Japan recognized a threat by 2012, when Abe returned as

prime minister, galvanized by China's gray zone tactics putting the security of the Senkaku Islands, also claimed by China, at risk. The United States' unambiguous recognition of a serious threat was slower to materialize, but it was clear by the late Obama years, contributing to the enthusiastic response to Abe's upgrading of the alliance and Japan's military role. Australia was next, as its bilateral ties with China worsened in response to China's sharp power interference inside that country and then determination to single Australia out for "wolf warrior" aggression. Last to awaken in large measure to the threat from China was India, the only one of the Quad to suffer tens of deaths from armed conflict. Although the timing and degree of awakening to China's threat varied, in 2020, security drove the four to join hands, buttressed by naval exercises, arms sales, and a desire to gain strength in numbers.

All sides stress that FOIP is not aimed at containing China but at building a rules-based order. Since it is recognized that China rejects that order, the effect is containment as long as China does not change direction. Efforts are made to highlight promotion of infrastructure projects, counterposed to China's support for these in a more suspect manner, and in 2021 to joint work on the production and dissemination of vaccines, but the resolve of the Quad is best captured by joint military exercises and plans, if not institutionalized, for the defense of sea lanes. A turning point occurred after the October 2020 Quad ministerial meeting when India invited Australia to join the United States and Japan in the Malabar naval exercises. This sent a signal of a security alignment.

Threat perceptions may not suffice if other threats are given precedence. Biden argued that he had to end "forever wars" in order to concentrate on the primary threat from China and related threats from Russia and North Korea. Japan's leadership considered the China threat so serious that it tried to ignore Russia's threat and pay less attention to the North Korean threat. Australia did not have another visible threat and grew concerned about China's plans for nearby Pacific islands. It was India's threat perceptions that mattered most for the fate of the Quad, given the priority on Pakistan and the related instability now mounting in Afghanistan. China's incursion and assault in the Himalayan border area, its rapid maritime buildup, and its strong support for Pakistan all awakened India to a growing threat. Its security alarm provided the missing element for the Quad.

China insisted that US arms sales to Taiwan and more overt support for its independence, as well as Japan's shift to boost defense ties with Taiwan in 2021, posed security threats to unification plans in keeping with sovereignty rights. As signs that China could try to take Taiwan by force mounted, this island became the object of US talk of abandoning "strategic ambiguity" over whether it would come to the island's defense. US-Japan coordination on Taiwan came into the open. Australia was not expected to play an active role unless the South China Sea became part of a conflict. India was distant from this hot spot, but the cohesion of the Quad could be tested if security concerns centered on Taiwan rather than on the Indian Ocean of the Sino-Indian border.

China, to early 2020, dismissed the Quad as just a "headline-grabbing idea," and in mid-2020 was focused on driving a wedge between its members and frightening off at least one. By late 2020, it was fully on the offensive against what it saw

as an effort to forge an “Indo-Pacific NATO.” By mid-2021, the Quad had jelled, the United States was leading, and Japan was moving further in inserting itself into security over Taiwan, as well as the South China Sea. In opposition to Trump, Biden put stress on democratic values, as well as territorial integrity. It was not clear, however, that the United States and Japanese new alarm about Taiwan plus the continued concern about North Korea would lead others to feel confident that they would not be entrapped. On Taiwan, the United States was clarifying its commitment, Japan was joining, Australia was trying to keep somewhat apart by focusing on economics, and India was struggling to stay noncommittal, not alienating China. Clearly, India was the most hesitant party as a three-way alliance tightened further in 2022 in a more dangerous world environment.

### **Economic Vulnerability**

Concern that the BRI was making India vulnerable by isolating it from its neighbors and putting them under unacceptable Chinese influence was one driving force in the rise of the Japan-India-US-Australia Quad. Japan long appealed to India with an alternative economic vision for a degree of bilateral balance with Indo-Chinese ties and hyping East-West connectivity at odds with BRI. This was both maritime in nature, in tune with Japan’s heavy dependence on shipping in the Indian Ocean, and continental, countering China’s buildup of north-south infrastructure, notably in Southeast Asia. Although India’s economy left it quite unprepared for TPP or an FTA, it loomed as a long-term target of Japan and the United States, as both worried that China’s economic clout would overwhelm areas along the Indian Ocean and sought a rising economic counterweight in the global community. Fears of economic vulnerability to China have bolstered Quad support in India, given its weaker economy and recent trade growth.

India stood as the economic alternative to China, even when its market was more closed and its hospitality to foreign investment had long been more suspect. With the United States and Japan at the highest end of the production chain, having over more than a quarter century relied on the Chinese labor force at the lower and eventually the middle range of the chain, fear of China now reaching the high end as well and of it using economic pressure to gain unfair access to advanced technology drove aspirations for India to become the new China. Decoupling from China would be a tortuous process after it began gradually in the second half of the 2010s, while connecting with India was proving difficult as well, despite rising hopes after Modi took office in 2014. Fear of economic vulnerability to China helped Trump win the 2016 election and proved useful to his fear-mongering approach to governance, but Trump dangled hopes of US self-sufficiency rather than economic interdependence with other states, including India. He restricted migration, which was bad for India, from which many highly educated workers were coming, and railed against any trade deficit, which was bound to grow with India if the earlier Chinese pattern was repeated. For Japan too, India’s promise was not fully realized due to Japan’s closed corporate culture and tight restrictions on labor in migration.

The economic potential of this triangle was slow to be realized. Still, the triangle was more appealing due to shared economic vulnerability to China.

With the United States adverse to rejoining TPP, it was struggling for another way to provide a positive economic vision for the Indo-Pacific region beyond a security vision. Countries insist that it engage on both fronts. By keeping TPP alive in a reduced form and leading in efforts to promote infrastructure, Japan carried the economic burden, although on infrastructure finance, the United States, Japan, and Australia joined in the Blue Dot Network, which certifies quality projects. Biden is intent on building a coalition behind economic security—different than Trump’s unwelcome unilateralism for trade wars—which strives to lessen economic vulnerability in place of TPP. In 2022, the United States was gradually unfolding an economic framework for the Indo-Pacific but not planning to rejoin the TPP while concentrating on the linkages between economics and security. Economic vulnerability was on the minds of many but so too was the revival of economic growth after the pandemic, requiring more open trade.

### **National Identity Incompatibility**

If in the 2010s Japan appeared to be boosting “Asianism” through its leadership when the United States had pulled back, the main thrust of its efforts and those pressed by Biden as he took the lead in the Quad was a “community of democracies.” The three allies echoed each other’s values, but India’s tradition of “strategic autonomy” and refusal to consider exporting democratic values weakened the consensus on identity symbols in the quad.

Several identity concepts have shaped the evolution behind this Quad over three decades. Indian history had trouble shaking off its postcolonial identification with the nonaligned movement, which led to resenting the United States and making common cause with the Soviet Union and left a legacy of belief in strategic autonomy, as well as economic autarchy. Japanese history in the postwar period consisted of reaching out through economic integration relying on production networks while narrowly focusing on the defense of Japan relying on its US alliance. India was a reach too far, given its economic policy, despite the potential overlap of Japanese pacifism as the idealistic path to Asianism and Indian nonalignment as the driver in outreach to Asia. As for Australia, its boom years through trade with China slowed awareness of the threat, as it debated a history of anti-Asianism and sought to overcome it. The US ideal of the “free world” versus the communist bloc in pursuing partners in Asia also had potential to encompass democratic India, especially with India from the 1960s, an enemy of “Red China,” but a tilt toward Pakistan and India’s tilt toward the Soviet Union dashed such prospects. Finally, the Japanese nuclear allergy bumped up against the Indian pursuit of nuclear weapons. Until the end of the 1990s, even after the Cold War had ended, there was scant sign of dynamism that could have resulted in the Quad.

National identity factors on all sides drove the countries in this framework to reach out to each other from the beginning of the 2000s. Changes in thinking about

Russia, China, and Pakistan proved to be important. For India, Russia's desperate decade left it an unsteady reed on which to lean, China's rapid rise through economic integration into the world community made it both a threat far more serious than before and a precursor of reforms that could not be avoided, and Pakistan's emergence as a nuclear state supporting terrorist causes left India vulnerable even as it asserted its nuclear weapons capabilities. India's identity had to change with the final collapse of the nonaligned movement, the temptation of globalization, the dynamic impact of East Asia, and the appeal of India as a potential great power to the great powers jockeying for regional influence. Its decision to Look East and to convey its nuclear clout into great power aspirations opened it to US and Japanese diplomatic wooing, in both cases influenced by recent national identity thinking.

As Washington responded to the rise of China, it shifted from Cold War anti-communism to pro-democracy, anti-terrorism in pursuit of like-minded countries. While it tried to cut a deal with Pakistan after the 9/11 attack on the United States, relations remained rocky, and sympathy with India was rising. Even as US policy kept searching for a grand bargain with China, US identity veered to suspicion of China and clarification of what made the United States and its partners ideologically distinct. India loomed not only for strategic balance but also for identity clarity as a democratic outpost, along with Japan and Australia. Long before the idea of the Quad entered official narratives, it was permeating unofficial thinking. Despite India's hesitation about embracing such an identity compact due to lingering postcolonial avoidance of democracy as an overarching identity, US hopes persisted as relations gradually improved. India became the anchor in a widening notion of the Indo-Pacific area as a like-minded community separate from China to be either a beacon for China's transformation or a bulwark against its designs to forge a Sinocentric Asian community.

After Japan was frustrated in the 1990s in forging regionalism centered on Northeast Asia and later broadened to include Southeast Asia, it reconceptualized Asian regionalism to balance the rise of China while still trying to include China. India was the natural extension of its quest. It had value for Japan's identity quest for at least four reasons: (1) as the home of Buddhism, which had spread to become the cultural and religious centerpiece of Japan's identity; (2) as the home of the judge at the Tokyo Tribunal who refused to find Japanese guilty of war crimes and could be perceived as representative of a people whom Japan's war reach had helped spur to liberation from colonialism, for which they should be grateful and help in reversing the verdict on Japan's conduct; (3) as the bookend along with Japan to an arc of freedom to promote regionalism that would counter China's plans to forge a different regional identity and community; and (4) as the ideal partner to reconstruct the Japan-US alliance within the Indo-Pacific while giving Japan room to maneuver in order to make the alliance more equal. Simultaneously, Japan could move forward on boosting traditional identity, achieving a "normal Japan" over 20th-century history, advancing Asianism, becoming a political and strategic great power as well as an economic one, and resetting the alliance with the United States on more equal terms while containing China.

Trump's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" was not about rallying countries behind a set of ideals so much as about warning them about the threat of China with its distortion of

free-market ideals, lack of transparency, and alleged strategy of using economic dependency to achieve political hegemony. Japan could accept this adjustment since it had been most alarmed about the regional strategy of China and most concerned about US abandonment. Obama was too cautious for it, Trump too unilateralist with “America First.” As long as Abe remained in charge, even if Trump alienated Japan with trade pressure or sanctions, this identity framework seemed irreversible. It could attract Australia. India remained the wild card, agreeing as Japan did to closer economic cooperation with China while still clinging to its identity of strategic autonomy and no alliances.

With an identity-centered Quad almost within grasp, it proved slow to materialize. All four nations were cautious about making such an ideological break with China, given that China was not openly presenting its pursuit of regionalism in ideological terms apart from occasional talk of Asia for the Asians. US leadership was hesitant or distracted: seeking Pakistan’s assistance in the Afghan War, appealing to China for help versus North Korea and versus climate change, among other causes, or Trump eschewing national identity themes even as he signed onto a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” Japan’s leadership other than Abe and Aso Taro was not outspoken on identity issues conducive to the triangle, shadowed by the legacy of passive diplomacy and hesitation about strengthening the US alliance and expanding Japan’s reach beyond economic regionalism. The most serious barrier, however, was India’s reluctance to become part of such an overt grouping.

## **Dynamics of the Japan, US, Australia, India Quest for the Quad**

The Quad has extraordinary promise strategically, economically, and even for identity overlap. It is difficult to specify anything more likely to disrupt it than Indian politics. The Japan-US leg is solid militarily and is unbothered by any identity gap likely to grow. The Japan-India leg has emerged smoothly and has great potential for economic complementarity, as well as security and identity overlap. Australia has drawn much closer to Japan and remains a close ally of the United States. If the US-India leg can build on Indian service industries, English-language commonalities, and a shared vision of dealing with China, the possibilities are boundless. Yet Modi is drawn to a national identity at odds with the liberal, international order, and India’s turn away from inward-looking strategic autonomy is too recent and uncertain to be an uncontested foundation ahead.

The Quad has the potential to be a game changer. It could turn triangularity into bipolarity by expanding under US leadership and arousing China to press harder for its own bloc, starting with the socialist legacy triangle. South Korea, in turn, would lose hope for its triangle shaping, with North Korea fallen off its diplomatic radar. Japan would have succeeded as the inspiration for the Quad and have little further recourse for diplomatic prospects with Russia or even China. If these developments ensue, observers will conclude that the age of triangularity was fleeting—coming between the end of the first Cold War US-Soviet bipolarity and the start of the second Cold War Sino-US bipolarity, following a spike in US unipolarity and whiffs of hopeful multipolarity.

In the short-term, the Quad will coexist with triangles, awaiting moves by both Xi in the more constrained circumstances China faces and US presidents struggling to overcome internal divisions and continue to rebuild the confidence of allies and partners. The US retreat after its defeat in Afghanistan raised more questions about US steadfastness. Instead of South Korea and Japan testing the waters of regional geopolitical reconstruction, the key states for solidifying the formations under observation are North Korea and India. Will the former yield to the socialist legacy? This is a matter of national identity, as well as security, not economics. Also, will India discard its mantra of strategic autonomy and commit more wholeheartedly to the Quad? This too is a test of national identity, as well as security in defiance of many economic arguments.

The fate of regional architecture depends on an economic strategy to counteract China's advantages, on the persistence of Chinese aggressiveness alienating others, and on the effectiveness of the case for a shared national identity overcoming various lingering national identity gaps and standing in opposition to China's national identity challenge. Connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, it redefines the way the sprawling scope of Asia is understood, leaving in the shadows Russian calls to center it on Eurasia and Chinese Sinocentric assumptions looking out from its territory.

Attention to the Quad has the potential to preempt triangular thinking on the geopolitics of Asia. It deliberately focuses on China's challenge throughout the region, prioritizing the maritime arena and countering the strategic thrust of the BRI. Given Japan's leadership in launching the Quad, it's poised to assume a role second only to the United States in driving this initiative to fruition. It is a response not only to the southward thrust of China's BRI but to the rise of India as a maritime force looking eastward. Having turned the South China Sea into a military hot spot and moved its navy into the Indian Ocean, China has provoked the quest for the Quad since the early 2000s. India in 2020 was driven to join, but it remains the limiting factor in its security, economic, and national identity cohesion, especially seen in the war atmosphere of 2022 when India refused to join in condemning Russia's aggression.

The US-Japan-Australia triangle drew closer in the early 2020s. Security and identity themes resonated clearly. The Quad lacked such clarity, but it served a useful role in putting pressure on China. Japan had played a vital role in nursing it and might have more to do as Indo-US tensions over Russia were being felt. At a time of growing bipolarity, India's place remained to be settled.

# 11

## CONCLUSION

### How Triangularity Adjusts to Bipolarity

This chapter looks back at what we have learned from nine case studies, each emphasizing three dimensions of triangularity, and looks ahead to the interplay of rising bipolarity and the already deeply embedded forces of triangularity. It reinforces the argument for putting triangles more at the center of attention in international relations. Thus far, bilateral relations are the recognizable building blocks of the field, reinforced by the bipolarity of the Cold War and growing sentiment that, at least in the Indo-Pacific region, the Sino-US dyad takes center stage. Realists are prone to showcase multilateral alliances, such as NATO, while boosters of economic liberalism gravitate to multilateral institutions in either the international community or regionalism. The one triangle that had its heyday in the last stages of the Cold War was the Grand Strategic Triangle of China, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Since that time, the mention of triangles has been sporadic with no systematic assessment of multiple triangles in the evolving global and regional context. In the post-Cold War era through the 2010s, triangles played a transformative role.

The three decades following the end of the Cold War were marked by dramatic shifts in relative power, economic interrelationships, and national identity narratives. All of the triangles under consideration were transformed. Analysis of the bilateral changes in Northeast Asia has become commonplace. The way one thinks about the region, however, can be altered by using the prism of triangularity since all of the bilateral relationships have an important element of that. Japan, South Korea, North Korea, and Russia have proceeded with unmistakable awareness of the United States and China in their bilateral relations with each other and, of course, with these two dominant powers. China's rise has made such triangular calculations more imperative. It has given the countries influenced by their socialist legacy space to maneuver with other countries. It has induced South Korea to seek space for more autonomous diplomacy. And it has driven Japan to reach beyond its alliance with

the United States for managing relations with China. A bilateral focus has resulted in missing the three overarching dynamics in how Northeast Asia has changed.

The above picture may appear premature. Moscow insists it deserves respect as a justifiable member of the Grand Strategic Triangle, given its strategic weapons and the war footing it has aroused. Pyongyang hunkers down with its strategic weapons, unwilling to let external influences seep into the country. China remains far from consolidating the countries sharing a socialist legacy. This falls well short of an alliance triangle. Yet, consider how far it has shifted from recent years when Pyongyang pursued multidirectional diplomacy, and Moscow nourished hopes of leading a Greater Eurasian Partnership. Neither has joined the BRI, but both are dependent on China to an unprecedented degree. Although triangular maneuvering persists, it is refocusing on the ups and downs of consolidating China's leadership with reduced autonomy. By daring to start a big war, Moscow assumed that Beijing would have its back, but time would tell.

Seoul was likewise not ready to stand squarely in the US camp versus China or in a triangle with Tokyo. Dreams of reunification and contestation for North Korea with Beijing were very much alive. Yet its prospects of driving triangularity eventually diminished. Loss of hope for ties to Beijing, Pyongyang, and Moscow left it largely reconciled to US consolidation of regional allies and partners. The test of ROK-Japan reconciliation looms as the point of fuller recognition.

The third state driving the transitional era has evolved as well, as Japan adjusted its search for greater influence by first recognizing China's relentless pursuit of Sinocentrism and only later despairing of outreach to Russia as if it could be a swing country. Japan has facilitated the US shift to consolidating a camp resistant to Chinese expansionism even if it has more to do if the essential objective of trilateralism with South Korea under US leadership is soon to be realized.

Bipolarity is most pronounced in security and at sea, where the US-Japan alliance counters China. Gradually, it has become clearer on land too, given the lineup over North Korea and the Sino-Indian clash. New awareness of the seriousness of economic vulnerability has led to bipolarity in dual-use technologies, high-tech, and supply chains. National identities are, by no means, aloof from this trend. The Cold War ideological divide has not been duplicated, but in China, Russia, and North Korea the language of unbridgeable differences with the United States and its allies over views of the world order and "color revolutions" echoes the Cold War era, and for the United States, as well as some of its allies, the urgency of a community of democracies against authoritarian abusers of human rights is reminiscent of that earlier time. All dimensions are leading toward bipolarity, although Russia remains capable of acting on its own, albeit with the knowledge that China is supportive and North Korea also can proceed with similar assurance.

A focus on security in triangles must not mean disregard of the way economic vulnerability and national identity incompatibility are perceived and serve as forces for influencing the dynamics of these triangles. Management of triangular maneuvering involves calculating the balance of power and the relative threat levels, while also making use of the economic dependency of other countries and striving to widen the

national identity gap between two states while narrowing the gap one's own state has with both. These three aspects of triangular relationships do not operate independently; policymakers are often conscious of all of them together when making decisions.

As security threats proceed toward bipolarity, triangularity on other dimensions becomes harder.

The competition between Beijing and the United States is likely to be decided by high-tech developments and ability to protect supply chains after some decoupling. On this, dimension bipolarity has been proceeding most haltingly, leaving abundant room for more maneuvering and for China to use economic vulnerability to resist steps toward decoupling. If an arms race is hurling the region toward bipolarity, the search for separate economic frameworks to reduce the threat of economic vulnerability promises to be a complicated process for two polarized camps. Yet it accelerated dramatically in the shadow of the Ukraine war under active US leadership.

The nine cases herein reflect three driving forces: China's use of the socialist legacy in order to forge a Sinocentric region, South Korea's quest for reunification and a Korea-centric regional transformation inviting others to regard it as the soft spot for their regional designs, and Japan's embrace of its US alliance in a multidirectional approach to contain the threat of Sinocentrism. A socialist legacy troika is within sight, and a US-led network is gathering steam, as the dreams of South Korea are fluttering. The first agenda is increasingly China-dominated, but only slowly reducing the scope of Russian and North Korean maneuverability. The second agenda proved elusive, struggling to survive. As for the third agenda, Japan aspired to more room to maneuver in the Indo-Pacific and even to cross boundaries. Instead, it doubled down on Japan-US ties, helping steer its ally to the leadership role necessary for bipolarity in response to China's ambitions. Russia, South Korea, and Japan had hopes of reshaping the architecture of Asia, which have been dashed or are on life support. China's hopes remain, and the United States is clarifying its own agenda in response. Russia and North Korea could still remain wild cards.

Bipolarity is on the upswing. Russia's ever-growing ties to and asymmetry with China reduced the chance of pursuing a border-crossing breakthrough with Japan even before 2022. South Korea's diminished hope for orchestrating great power diplomacy with North Korea or finding a balancing role in the triangle with the United States and China hit an impasse. The autonomy Japan demonstrated when the United States was less preoccupied with the Indo-Pacific or indifferent to multilateralism has given way to a tightening embrace. Triangular maneuvering was proving more difficult, especially after Russia aroused the United States and its allies on one side and won early acquiescence from China and North Korea on the other. This is classic bipolarity.

### **Tests of Triangularity over Three Decades**

In the 1990s, China was still generally cautious, South Korea was slow to flex its diplomatic muscle, and Japan was anticipating a leadership role in Asian regionalism rather than a severe, adversarial relationship with China. The three socialist legacy

countries approached each other gingerly, had weak economic ties with each other, downplayed any identity overlap, and gave the United States space to handle North Korea with little direct input. Only when Kim Dae-jung launched his Sunshine Policy at the end of the decade did Seoul draw attention for showing initiative, but Kim Dae-jung concentrated on rallying all behind his mission, not on maneuvering in triangular contexts. As Japan was doubling down on its alliance with the United States in the second half of the '90s, it was confident enough to explore triangular possibilities, as with Russia and China, but these were premised on outdated assumptions about Japan's leverage and had to be reconsidered when Koizumi Junichiro became settled as prime minister in 2002, alienating China with his Yasukuni visits and dismissing Russia with no interest in a compromise. Triangularity was secondary in the 1990s.

What boosted triangularity in the 2000s? More assertive leadership played a big role. China was now focused on its neighborhood instead of being obsessed with great power relations, seizing the opportunities raised by its economic rise and by the US diversion to other areas of Asia. The Bush administration's assertiveness centered elsewhere, leaving more space for Pyongyang, Seoul, Beijing, and Moscow to take the initiative in Northeast Asia, as Tokyo recalibrated its choices too in a more triangular environment, striving more to balance China's rise and to keep the United States engaged. Efforts by leaders to reconstruct national identities mattered greatly. Hu Jintao led China to break in stages with Deng Xiaoping's caution and build on Jiang Zemin's refocus on historical humiliation with a more assertive identity. Vladimir Putin strove to rebuild much of the Soviet identity of national pride and external assertiveness, rejecting the reticence shown by Boris Yeltsin about Russia's "national idea." Kim Jong-il emerged from a period of famine and quiet transition to assert military prowess as an aspiring nuclear power that gave him a seat at the diplomatic table. Roh Moo-hyun championed an autonomous identity for Seoul unlike its more reserved attitude in the 1990s. Finally, Koizumi followed by Abe Shinzo in his first stint at the top broke taboos about Japanese identity with implications for assertive relations with several neighbors. The decade of the 2000s witnessed a rise in triangularity, but more was to come.

The security and economic forces driving greater triangular prominence were secondary until the end of the 2000s. China was not yet seen as a power that could challenge the United States in the region nor as a country capable of playing on the economic dependency of other countries in any concerted manner. Russia still had a low profile in Northeast Asia despite newly improving ties to China. Japan's rapid succession of prime ministers were in power too briefly to set course on a new pathway. North Korea faced a rather united front in the Six-Party Talks on the key question rather than finding space to play one country against another. And South Korea was unable to gain leverage to advance Roh's aspirations before Lee Myung-bak pulled back from them. There were many signs of increasing exploration of triangular agendas, but they had not matured to the point of bringing triangularity to center stage. Above all, the two dominant powers were rather restrained due to China's continued hesitation to 2009 and US preoccupation elsewhere.

Putin 2.0 and Abe 2.0 took the top posts in their respective countries, determined to transcend the malaise they saw in recent foreign policy. If Xi Jinping was already a factor as a member of the political standing committee from 2007 in pushing a more aggressive Chinese posture, his unbridled authority from 2012 offered a chance to take things much further. Kim Jong-un started with a unilateral approach, bringing belligerent defiance of the international community to a new level before he began to convert his military capabilities into diplomatic prowess. Park Geun-hye went further in diplomatic maneuvering than her predecessors, but she was far eclipsed by Moon Jae-in, reviving the progressive outlook on North Korea. Finally, Barack Obama activated US triangular strategizing beyond anything seen before while respecting certain boundaries at a time of uncertainty. Only with the arrival of Donald Trump, who despite his “America First” unilateralism pressed other countries intensely, do we see trilateralism at full force. Eschewing the standard form of diplomacy and taking little interest in multilateralism in any form, including trilateralism, Trump, nevertheless, served as the catalyst for incipient or partially developed strategic frameworks taking flight. He brought North Korea into the diplomatic arena, drove China more openly into a confrontational mode, and conducted an awkward dance with Abe and Moon that exposed their rising triangular moves. The 2010s saw triangularity rising to a peak.

The nine triangles/Quad covered in preceding chapters all reached a more mature and revelatory form at the end of the 2010s. The three triangles in Part I expose the lingering potency of the socialist legacy with renewed closeness between Moscow and Beijing cognizant of the high costs of the Sino-Soviet split, the revived role of North Korea as their often-wayward partner valuable still as a bulwark against the US presence in the region, and the significance of the North as a force influencing the most important bilateral nexus—Sino-US relations. These triangles were substantially different after Xi took office with more assertiveness, Putin in 2014 aggressively moved into Ukraine, and Kim Jong-un coupled a rush to nuclear and missile power in 2017 with a turn to wide-ranging, intensive diplomacy in 2018. Trump shifted swiftly from one approach to another: embrace Putin, demonize Kim Jong-un, seek a comprehensive deal with Xi, sanction Putin, embrace Kim, set a confrontational course toward Xi, etc. Through the fog of his policy and rhetorical shifts emerged a picture of the socialist legacy triangles taking clearer shape. If bipolarity strengthens, China will dictate the behavior of Russia and North Korea, but this trailed the forces of bipolarity on the other side, especially after the 2022 war was met with US resolve.

The three triangles in Part II are a tribute to the vital position of South Korea at the crossroads of Northeast Asian strategic transformation. Its alliance with the United States has remained solid—a necessity in the face of the North Korean threat—but its exploration of options showed clear signs of a shift toward multisided relations, altering various triangles and transforming the overall strategic picture in Northeast Asia. Korean presidents have referred to being a “balancer,” proposed initiatives for a new regional framework, showcased a “honeymoon” with China, kept pursuing Russia with the allure of big-time vertical realignment across North

Korea, balked at the United States' calls for trilateralism with Japan, and repeatedly appealed to the North to take back control over maneuvering over the peninsula from the powers external to it. Finally, at the end of the 2010s, the stars were aligned for Seoul to take its boldest steps toward combining a full range of these aspirations in one urgent—desperate—attempt to take charge, avoiding the danger of marginalization should the patterns identified in the triangles of Part I come to fruition. Yet, war in Ukraine, distrust of China, failure of diplomacy with North Korea, and the election of a conservative president in 2022 gave the United States an opening to solidify its alliance.

The triangles/Quad of Part III group Japan with others, as it strives to maintain its status in the top ranks of world powers in the face of signs it may be dropping into the ranks of the middle powers. Its economic clout was slipping over the three decades since the end of the Cold War and the simultaneous collapse of Japan's "bubble economy." As security grew in importance in Northeast Asia, Japan's vulnerability on this dimension grew more obvious, even as it wrestled with playing a larger military role. Hopes for Japanese soft power peaked in the 1980s, leaving it to veer between arousing national pride through historical revisionism and championing values of the international community for regional application with or in place of the United States. The Japanese response to the increasing regional assertiveness of China, Russia, and India revealed its turn to a more proactive diplomacy, both pursuing autonomy from the United States and working to tweak US diplomacy to meet Japan's needs and to boost Japan's standing. When the US diverged in its policies, Japan found that it lacked the leverage to transform a triangle, as in the case of Russia. However, when US efforts coincided with Japan's, Japan was soon relegated to the weak side of the triangle, playing a secondary role, as with India and usually with China. It needed US support more than the other way around. Proceeding from one test after another of the Japan-US alliance, Japan reconciled to having to cling to the alliance ever more closely.

Sino-US polarization poses the biggest test of the triangular maneuvering that spread after the Cold War. Both powers are pressing states to make a choice unlike anything seen in this era. In security alignment, economic decoupling, and identity narratives, change is notable. Aspirations for continuing to avoid a choice between the two survive, but opportunities are much diminished. Of the three driving forces, Japan first and then South Korea were accommodating to bipolarity. Only Russia in Europe, distant from China's priorities, was testing the limits of its autonomy.

## Strategic Threat

While for a time in the 1990s it was anticipated that economic interests would drive Northeast Asia's transformation, encouraging multilateral regionalism, strategic thinking propelled the area in a different direction. China, Russia, and the United States prioritized their views of security, leaving none of them predisposed to a multilateral framework that could bring complications. It was naïve of the Japanese to think otherwise in the 1990s and for the South Koreans to dangle ideas for

regionalism in the 2010s. The notion of ASEAN centrality in the 2000s reached its high point, but this consensus-based heterogeneous group had no prospect of herding great powers. On the US alliances, North Korea's security challenge, Taiwan, and the South China Sea, views diverged sharply over security cooperation. Despite widespread agreement after the Cold War that no country had reason to use force to alter the status quo in Northeast Asia or beyond in Southeast Asia, the security situation kept deteriorating as threats were conjured from all sides.

The socialist legacy left the worldview that US hegemony would not yield except to superior force, that US alliances exist to contain Moscow or Beijing, and that the US and South Korean objective on the peninsula is regime change not a soft landing for North Korea. The upshot of this thinking was not that compromises could be reached but that Washington had to be pushed to back down, as did its allies in Tokyo and Seoul. Even amid talk of "win-win" outcomes, the prevailing narratives were that China and Russia required maximum development of their armed forces for balance against a serious threat and that Pyongyang was justified in resisting demands from Washington, even to the point of developing nuclear weapons, due to how it was treated. If Washington took conciliatory steps toward Pyongyang, however much they were welcomed, it was not a reason to change the rhetoric. If Beijing and Moscow agreed to sanctions on the North, professing to view denuclearization as essential, the rhetoric remained regarding the necessity for Washington and Seoul to fundamentally rethink security in Northeast Asia to reach an agreement.

Perceiving North Korea's rush to expand its threat capacity combined with belligerent rhetoric beyond anything heard from any other nuclear-armed state, the United States and its allies naturally raised their warnings about a security threat. Attentive to China's steady arms buildup and Russia's rush to reassert its status as one of the top military powers coupled with Cold War rhetoric, US awareness heightened of the threat coming separately from these states and from their direct or indirect coordination. On the front lines, as Pyongyang threatened them and Beijing advanced in the East China Sea, Tokyo and Seoul also prioritized threat perceptions. The most powerful force transforming Northeast Asia stopped being economic opportunities through integration, shifting instead to security threats funneled through the lens of national identities constructed on at least three foundations: socialist legacies, the "free world" versus communism or its heirs, and aspirations for higher status in the regional balance of power by finding a pathway to bridge the differences.

The Sino-US arms race was in full force by the early 2020s. Russia flexed its power, relying on China versus the United States. Japan perceived a growing threat, adding to its long-limited defense budget. North Korea's threat grew more ominous. Maritime zones became more contested. Bipolarity is most pronounced in security and at sea, where the US-Japan alliance counters China. Gradually, it has become clearer on land too, given the lineup over North Korea and the Sino-Indian clash. As security threats proceeded toward bipolarity, triangularity on other dimensions proved harder. The year 2022 was a watershed in perceptions of security dangers.

## Economic Vulnerability

Economic optimism had its heyday in the 1990s and remained quite prominent in the 2000s. The socialist legacy was assumed to be moribund, having failed economically. China was assumed to be the exemplar par excellence of the turn from a command economy to an open, market-based economy with fundamental decisions in 1978, 1992, and 2001 as it entered the WTO. Russia was on course to follow, and North Korea had incontrovertible incentives to do the same. Japan and South Korea dangled carrots before their socialist-based neighbors to join in the transformation. If these three neighbors all harbored, to a greater or lesser extent, concerns about becoming little more than cheap labor or resource-generating appendages vulnerable to the investing countries with their vast markets, expectations for opportunities overshadowed those about dependency in the minds of observers. For Tokyo and Seoul, this was the peak of rose-colored thinking about gaining regional influence that had eluded them in the Cold War era, little expecting that they could fall victim to economic vulnerability or use of economic gains for political assertiveness.

The reality in the 1990s made increasingly clear in the 2000s was that economic vulnerability was a huge concern in North Korea, Russia, and even China. Pyongyang's leaders preferred famine in order to hold tight to self-reliance plus Chinese assistance with few strings attached. It found a formula to draw South Korean infusions of cash plus Chinese trade and lesser Russian commerce without increasing its economic vulnerability much, albeit information flows posed a problem. Russia succeeded in boosting energy exports with minimal vulnerability, although in the 2010s, its expanding pipelines to China exposed it to pressure from just a single consumer. In China's case, ensuring that the state sector retained control of crucial sectors and levers meant that concern about economic vulnerability was shifting to confidence others would feel this more.

By the 2010s, economic vulnerabilities had become a big part of strategic calculations, as well as discussions about them. Was Seoul or Tokyo so vulnerable to China's dominant place in trade to be handicapped in managing its foreign policy? Had sanctions exerted such a great impact on the North Korean regime to alter its calculus? Were intensifying US sanctions—toward Russia and China, as well as North Korea—proof that Washington still held critical economic cards to serve its foreign policy—trade and security—objectives? Given Trump's indiscriminate use of sanctions against allies, as well as adversaries, how would Tokyo and Seoul adjust to the new pressure? As observers looked beyond Trump or ahead to China's growing economic weight, the question of how economic pressures would be applied had more resonance than in the first quarter century after the end of the Cold War. Rhetoric about protectionism, unfair trade practices, and sanctions had replaced cheery talk of globalization and openness in assessments of Northeast Asia's future.

Economic statecraft had become indistinguishable from security calculations. Many argued that the competition between Beijing and the United States would be decided by high-tech developments and ability to protect supply chains after some decoupling. Russia tolerated greater vulnerability to China, as in 5G technology,

but it was still seeking to draw some lines. The United States was rallying its allies and partners behind an Indo-Pacific economic framework, but this was a work in progress, and countries such as South Korea were too intertwined economically with China to make this easy. On this dimension, bipolarity was proceeding most haltingly, leaving abundant room for the most intense maneuvering and for China to use economic vulnerability to resist much decoupling. The US response to the Ukraine war raised the stakes for economic security. Washington rallied countries behind financial sanctions and export controls. Russia's vulnerability was key, but other states fixated on dangers they could face—e.g., by reorienting supply chains, reorganizing technology partnerships, and devising new strategies.

### National Identity Incompatibility

The United States after the Cold War was a status quo power in Asia, anxious at times that first Japan and then China would press an economic advantage in the region but without any agenda to extend its military presence, economic leadership, or ideology. It was a reactive superpower, content that the world was proceeding toward forging an international community, which would follow naturally after the collapse of the communist bloc. There was no national identity rival on the horizon, just an inward-looking China struggling to reconstruct its troubled identity and some whiff of Asian values suggestive of harmonious grouping rather than litigious individualism. Yet, triangular relations in Northeast Asia did not take long to become embroiled in identity divisions.

Indeed, US triumphalism as the winner of the Cold War, whose economic and identity agendas had no strong challengers, aroused others to pursue other identity claims, both allies and rivals.

US triumphalism, the popularity of globalization, and the search for a new regional community and identity in East Asia could not obscure the impact of identity barriers on triangular dynamics. These themes gave way to narrower notions of bilateral identity gaps with wider implications.

None of the triangles covered here escaped from national identity challenges. The Sino-Russian bond was complicated for a time by the powerful identity residue of the Sino-Soviet split, but by 1994, an identity overlap could be detected despite claims to the contrary. Joint statements that grew more explicit over time couched the overlap in seemingly realist language, opposing US unipolarity, but the identity undertone should have been unmistakable. Opposition to US policy toward North Korea became more pronounced over the 1990s without exposing the underlying identity concerns to wide scrutiny. Sino-Russian identity differences slowed improving relations, and North Korea's identity obstinacy did not invite support, but neither did export of US values to any of these three countries, against which they rallied separately and in overlapping ways.

For South Korea, more than security or economics, identity challenges stymied its aspirations, although the Sunshine Policy appeared briefly to overcome them as pragmatic outreach to all with the limited objective of capitalizing on

presumed shared Korean identity plus economic carrots to draw North Korea into a regional community to resolve a troubling security dilemma. ROK-Japanese historical memory clashes, ROK-Chinese “culture wars” and incompatibility in thinking about Sinocentrism, and ROK-DPRK irreconcilable differences over Korean identity left an implacable set of barriers. Even so, Seoul let its identity quest drive its foreign policy. Yet, it also supported “universal values,” and they took center stage in the tough climate of the 2020s.

The identity tensions of the 1990s paled before those of the 2000s in Northeast Asia. All sides felt emboldened to unmask more emotional approaches to sensitive issues. Sino-Russian rhetoric on shared identity attitudes, as well as parallel assertiveness about one’s own feelings, came to the fore, as intense diplomacy over North Korea revealed how identities mattered: reunification for Seoul, resuscitation of an old comrade in arms for Beijing or Moscow, abductions for Tokyo, and human rights for Washington. South Koreans awakened to a sharp historical dispute with China, as well as internet tensions over cultural symbols, exacerbated the identity gap with Japan and discovered differences long concealed with the United States over dealing with the North. The Yasukuni Shrine became the chief symbol of Japan’s troubles with its neighbors. Energized by its celebration of the Beijing Olympics, China pushed ahead with divisive identity themes in defiance of hopes raised with South Korea before 2004 of friendship that could even eclipse US-ROK friendship and with Japan in 2003 and summits of 2007–8 of “new thinking” and mutual cultural respect. Through ups and downs over the 2000s, identity gaps were becoming decidedly more serious factors in bilateral relations with spillover over how triangular ties were managed.

George W. Bush had posed a problem for identification with the international community due to his unilateral agenda that divided US allies and enraged potential adversaries. This made it more difficult to counter narratives espousing alternative identity agendas. Obama sought to bridge the identity divides, appealing to China with climate change as a goal to reinforce the international community, to Russia with a “reset” toning down Russia’s critique of that community, to North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks with no further hint of regime change, and to Japan and South Korea to overcome their tensions over the “comfort women” issue. His advocacy of TPP included a reassertion of the values long championed by Washington, and despite Beijing’s hard line against it as expressing Cold War values, it was meant to offer an open door to overcome value differences, as well as what were seen as Beijing’s unfair trade practices. Yet, Obama failed to stem the widening of national identity gaps, which were finally brought to center stage under the shadow of Trump’s “America First” crusade. The Russo-US and Sino-US gaps widened. Seoul and Tokyo were hesitant to acknowledge the affront caused by Trump’s rhetoric or behavior, given his embrace of Pyongyang in accord with Seoul’s desires and his support for Japan’s defense and its appeal for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” Yet, discontent was building over not only various of his policies but also his utter abandonment of cherished US values.

National identity gaps grew increasingly polarized. China’s “wolf warrior” behavior abroad and human rights outrages at home widened the divides. Biden’s revival of US-led values diplomacy overcame skepticism, especially after Russia’s aggression

led states to rally behind Ukraine. The gaps over historical identities, as between Japan and South Korea, paled before the huge hiatus between socialist legacy states, exposed for rampant disinformation, and the rest. The former no longer had a clear-cut ideology, while the US camp capitalized on shared beliefs in democracy.

## Looking Ahead

Three impacts in the Indo-Pacific of the 2022 awakening deserve emphasis. First, if Ukraine was the overwhelming focus, Taiwan was the understated subtext. As was well understood in China, the security, economic, and identity response to Russia implied a parallel response to China. The second impact was the culmination of the maturation of the US-Japan nexus in total solidarity. If at times in recent years questions were raised about whether there was full solidarity in policies toward Russia and even China or about the legacy of pacifism, doubts were completely erased. A third impact was clarification of the situation on the Korean Peninsula, muddled by rhetoric in South Korea about reunification and diplomacy without serious prospects. Not only had Yoon's victory brought a conservative back to power, but he also took office having abandoned hope in one-sided outreach to North Korea, amid national revulsion against China, and with a willingness to consider improved relations with Japan and trilateralism. The war in Europe had spillover effects, which accelerated forces already in play in Asia. The Sino-US strategic competition, earlier marked by tensions over Taiwan and the effects of a trade war unquestionably became qualitatively different in a time of war.

Security is foremost in people's minds, as at no time since the end of the Cold War has Russia dared to launch a war, while China threatens to do the same over Taiwan and North Korea keeps building and testing nuclear weapons and their delivery systems with hostile intent. The complacency of the 1990s continuing into the cut the 2010s has been shattered with no prospect of being restored across the globe. In East Asia, where hopes had risen particularly high after the Cold War, an awakening is apparent.

Economics was expected to build common interests to supersede security concerns, but that is even less likely in an era of diminished confidence in globalization of the world economy and free trade. Fear of economic vulnerability is bound to keep rising at a time of deepening signs of security threats. Security thinking has reverberated in new thinking about economic relations.

Hopes for rising regional identity and a single international community identity proved abortive in the 1990s. Efforts to establish an East Asian Community in the 2000s, reliant on ASEAN when no other center proved agreeable, floundered by the end of the decade. Trends in the 2010s were decidedly negative for forging shared identities beyond the appearance of closer China and Russia ties and Japan and US ties with strong identity elements. How can this pattern of identity clashes be reversed? In the Cold War, a clear identity target threatened others. China and a Sino-Russian accord in a war environment awakened many to a similar identity challenge in the 2020s.

National identity drives states to overreach. Japan pursued Russia fruitlessly not just for the return of the “Northern Territories” but even more for a breakthrough regarded as symbolic in putting the abnormal identity of *victim* from its loss in World War II behind it. South Korea sought in its pursuit of North Korea to make Koreanness whole through some process of reunification. China viewed North Korea through the lens of Sinocentrism, denying a multilateral approach at odds with that national obsession. Putin defied Abe at the end of the 2010s after leading him on. Kim Jong-un scorned Moon 2019 after taking advantage of his eagerness to lure Trump into bilateral talks. And Kim Jong-un spurned Xi, fearing Sinocentrism as another threat. Xi’s “wolf warrior” and “China Dream,” along with Putin’s revival of the Soviet sphere, alienated other states, fueling a US-led identity upsurge in the struggle against authoritarian assaults on the liberal international order. An overarching national identity is uniting the democratic-led camp.

Reversal of the forces of triangularity was the dominant trend in 2022 after three decades when they had reshaped East Asian dynamics. Identities are consolidating around two camps. Continuity in US leadership is essential for one camp to keep strengthening. The other camp is more problematic. China finds it hard to manage Russia, as demonstrated in Ukraine, and North Korea, which remains wary of Sinocentrism. The US-led camp has many economic tools to influence China, which appears to be more vulnerable than many presupposed. The US response to Russia shows how it manages to rally a powerful coalition in the face of rampant aggression. Less certain is US success in forging a national identity coalition despite Biden’s clear intentions to do so. China’s alienation of others may be the most promising pathway for national identity solidarity in the years ahead, but much depends on US steadfastness in leading not only a global coalition but also an Indo-Pacific one embracing security, economic vigilance, and a shared identity.

Russia’s war and China’s hard line in support of Russia and North Korea left little space for triangular maneuvering. Japan and South Korea had over three decades explored different approaches to the socialist legacy countries in hopes of some type of triangular breakthrough. They were left at a loss for further forms of outreach. The age of triangularity was waning. If it were to gain new life, the most likely cause would be overreach by either Xi Jinping alienating Russia or North Korea or Donald Trump returning to the presidency with renewed activity disruptive of US alliances. Leadership still matters despite the intensifying force of bipolarity.

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