

# An Unlikely Security Community: South Korea and Its Neighbors

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## Introduction

Scholars and policymakers have proposed the idea of constructing a security community in East Asia to cope with changing regional dynamics and global power shifts.<sup>1</sup> Security communities, or more precisely, collective security organizations, can be defined as “institutions that facilitate cooperation among their members” under the presumption that “all states have a common interests in preventing war and aggression, regardless of who the perpetrator and victim are.”<sup>2</sup> Because they “forbid the use of military force by one member state against another,” an attack by one member against another “is considered to be a threat to the whole community” so that “the entire membership is responsible for coming to the aid of the victims of aggression.”<sup>3</sup>

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1 Among others, see Donna Weeks, “An East Asian Security Community: Japan, Australia and Resources as ‘Security,’” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 65 (2011); Amitav Acharya, “Theoretical Perspectives on International Relations in East Asia,” in David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda, eds., *International Relations of Asia* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008); and Yukio Hatoyama, “A New Path for Japan,” *New York Times*, August 26 (2009) available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/27/opinion/27iht-edhatoyama.html> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

2 Jeffrey A. Frieden, David A. Lake, and Kenneth A. Schultz, *World Politics: Interests, Interactions, Institutions [Third Edition]* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2015), p. 206.

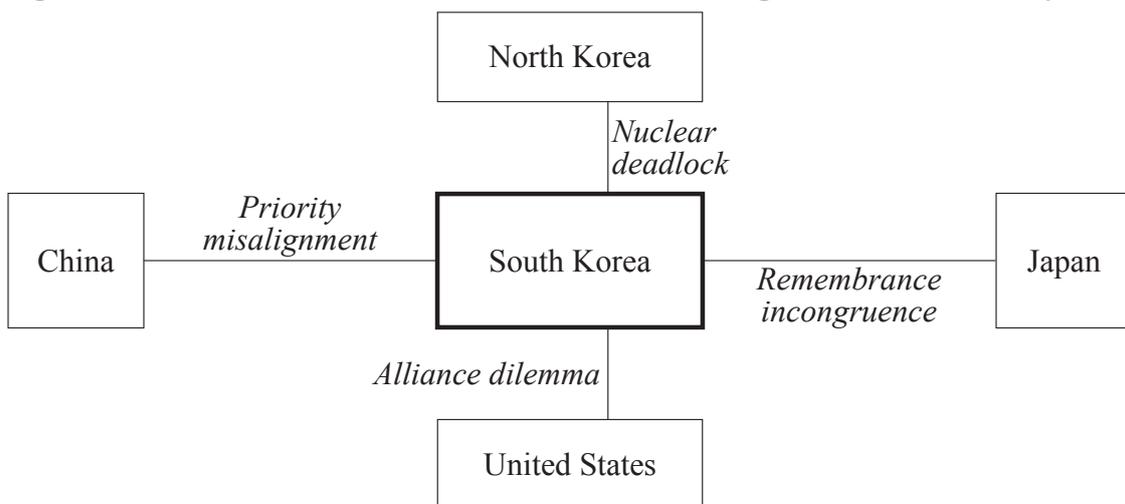
3 Ibid.

This paper, following this conceptual definition, examines the feasibility of building a security community in East Asia, focusing on how South Korea interacts with its regional neighbors — China, Japan, North Korea, and the United States.

In doing so, it characterizes each of South Korea's bilateral relations with its regional neighbors as nuclear deadlock with North Korea, alliance dilemma with the United States, priority misalignment with China, and remembrance incongruence with Japan. It also shows that the main determinants that constrain the autonomy of Seoul's defense policy involves security competition for regional hegemony between China and the United States, security-economy nexus that is produced by South Korea's high trade dependence on Chinese markets, and the South Korean public's anti-Japanese nationalist sentiment. It concludes with the finding that South Korea is facing multiple policy quandaries in security area that are more likely to diminish Seoul's defense policy autonomy due to Sino-American rivalry, China's influence over South Korea's economy, and South Korea's anti-Japanese nationalist attitude. As a result, the time for an East Asian security community seems not premature.

### South Korea's Bilateral Relations with Its Regional Neighbors

**Figure 1 South Korea's Bilateral Relations with Its Neighbors in the Security Area**



Each of South Korea's bilateral relations with its regional neighbors has its own unique characterization in the security area: (1) with North Korea, it is in *nuclear deadlock*; (2) with the United States, *alliance dilemma*; (3) with China, *priority misalignment*; and (4) with Japan, *remembrance incongruence*. Figure 1 schematizes each of these characterizations.

South Korea's gravest security threat emanates from a North Korea that continues to advance its nuclear and missile capabilities. North Korea has tested nuclear explosive devices in 2006, 2009, 2013, twice in 2016, and 2017, deployed short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, and successfully test-launched an intercontinental ballistic missile in 2017.<sup>4</sup> While South Korea

<sup>4</sup> See Chung-in Moon, Ren Xiao, Yasuhiro Izumikawa, Van Jackson, and Andrei Lankov, "Roundtable: The North Korean Nuclear Threat: Regional Perspectives on a Nuclear-Free Peninsula," *Asia Policy*, no. 23 (2017). For details about the

has sought to find a diplomatic solution to this problem through bilateral—inter-Korean summits—and multilateral—Six-Party Talks—dialogues since the 1990s, this effort had led nowhere, with Seoul ending up joining in 2017 the sanctions regime of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions 2371 and 2375 that restricts arms transfers and limits trade with North Korea.<sup>5</sup> Even though some within US policy circles are starting to consider preemptive military measures,<sup>6</sup> the predictable collateral damage makes Seoul hesitate to employ them in dissuading Pyongyang from developing nuclear weapons and missile programs. This *nuclear deadlock* that diplomatic solutions are unworkable while military measures are infeasible in dealing with the Kim Jong-un regime's nuclear ambition characterizes a critical aspect of South Korea's relations with North Korea.<sup>7</sup>

As North Korea expands its nuclear and missile capabilities, South Korea has to place greater demands on extended deterrence and assurance that its security ally, the United States, can provide. The demands inevitably raise the question in Seoul about the US commitments on the robustness of the alliance.<sup>8</sup> A classic security dilemma in alliance politics involves either a fear of abandonment that the United States might not defend South Korea against North Korea despite alliance arrangement or a fear of entrapment that South Korea might be entangled in military conflicts with a country other than North Korea due to alliance arrangement. Whereas the recent agreements between Seoul and Washington to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korean territory provokes the resentment of China and thus represents a peril of entrapment,<sup>9</sup> increasing doubts about the effectiveness of the US nuclear umbrella and calls for a South Korean nuclear deterrent to acquire indigenous nuclear weapons

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development of North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities, see the country profile of North Korea of the Nuclear Threat Initiative available at <http://www.nti.org/learn/countries/north-korea/> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

5 For details about the history of international sanctions on North Korea, see chronology of U.S.-North Korean nuclear and missile diplomacy available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron#2017> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

6 Mike Mullen, Sam Nuun, and Adam Mount, "A Sharper Choice on North Korea: Engaging China for a Stable Northeast Asia," Independent Task Force Report No. 74, Council on Foreign Relations (2016) available at <http://www.cfr.org/north-korea/sharper-choice-north-korea/p38259> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

7 Robert S. Litwak, *Preventing North Korea's Nuclear Breakout* (Washington, D. C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2017) available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/preventing-north-koreas-nuclear-breakout> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

8 Shane Smith, "Implications for US Extended Deterrence and Assurance in East Asia," North Korea's Nuclear Futures Series, US-Korea Institute at SAIS (2015) available at <http://uskoreainstitute.org/research/special-reports/nknc-smith/> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

9 Bonnie S. Glaser and Lisa Collins, "China's Rapprochement with South Korea: Who Won the THAAD Dispute?" *Foreign Affairs*, November 7 (2017) available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-07/chinas-rapprochement-south-korea> (accessed on November 12, 2017); Jin Kai, "THAAD Deployment: South Korea's Alliance Dilemma? South Korea's tough THAAD choice is a real-world example of the alliance dilemma," *Diplomat*, July 25 (2016) available at <http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/thaad-deployment-south-koreas-alliance-dilemma/> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

capabilities epitomize a peril of abandonment.<sup>10</sup> This *alliance dilemma* that both abandonment and entrapment hazards should be avoided in managing security cooperation characterizes a crucial dimension of South Korea's relations with the United States.

To enforce the sanctions regime of UNSC Resolutions 2371 and 2375 that are expected to ease nuclear deadlock that South Korea faces, it is vital to obtain coordinated actions in implementing punitive measures from China. As North Korea's biggest trading partner and primary source of food, arms, and energy, China possesses incomparable economic leverage over Pyongyang. The expectation of Seoul for Beijing to apply pressure to the Kim Jong-un regime to renounce its nuclear ambition is incongruent with China's main security interest to ensure a friendly nation on its northeastern border and provide a buffer zone between the People's Liberation Army and US troops and marines stationed in South Korea.<sup>11</sup> The then President Park Geun-hye's presence at the military parade during China's commemoration of the 70th anniversary of Japan's defeat in World War II, which provoked serious concerns from Washington, could not change anything with regard to the Xi Jinping government's security policy priorities that nuclear-armed North Korea would be better than the collapse of the Kim Jong-un regime and a refugee influx.<sup>12</sup> This *priority misalignment* that one prefers the preservation of the status quo to the revision of it while another prefers the revision of the status quo to the preservation of it characterizes a significant property of South Korea's relations with China.

To the extent that priority misalignment between South Korea and China is unresolvable in the near term, Seoul's reliance on US extended deterrence and security assurance has to deepen. As Pyongyang's nuclear and missile capabilities continue to develop and the frequency and severity of its aggressive behavior increase, South Korea and Japan, threatened by a common foe—North Korea—and coordinated by a common ally—the United States—share a common interest to tighten collaboration and strengthen their deterrence and defense posture. The formation of trilateral security cooperation partnership among South Korea, Japan, and the United States would be one of the most effective strategic assets to reduce North Korea's incentive to divide the three partners with selective military strikes.<sup>13</sup> The desirable collective goods in the East Asian security sphere tend to be undersupplied not least due to the recurrent identity clashes between South Korea and Japan in the process of their historical reconciliation.

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10 Lee Byung-Chul, "Preventing a Nuclear South Korea," *38 North*, September 16 (2016) available at <http://38north.org/2016/09/bclee091516/> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

11 Eleanor Albert and Beina Xu, "The China-North Korea Relationship," CFR Backgrounders, February 8 (2016) available at <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-north-korea-relationship/p11097> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

12 Jonathan D. Pollack, "Park in Beijing: The Political Transformation of Northeast Asia," Brookings Order from Chaos, September 4 (2015) available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2015/09/04/park-in-beijing-the-political-transformation-of-northeast-asia/> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

13 Michael J. Green, "Strategic Asian Triangles," in Saadia Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot, eds., *Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

While President Moon Jae-in and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo have tried restoring the bilateral relationship, domestic controversies over an agreement on the comfort women issue in 2015 exemplifies the volatile nature of historical animosity between the two nations.<sup>14</sup> This *remembrance incongruence* that one's over-demand for contrition generates apology fatigue while another's under-supply of remorse triggers the blame for historical amnesia characterizes an important feature of South Korea's relations with Japan.

In sum, South Korea and its regional neighbors have complex interactions that render community formation problematic in the security domain. The nuclear deadlock with North Korea may create a potential common threat by which South Korea and other neighbors can build the foundation of a collective security organization. However, in coping with the nuclear deadlock, South Korea, while it wants to avoid the danger of entrapment due to the alliance arrangement with the United States, fears the hazard of abandonment from its security sponsor. In addition to the alliance dilemma with the United States, South Korea suffers from the priority misalignment with China in which the former seeks denuclearization even at the cost of North Korea's regime change whereas the latter prioritizes the regime survival in dealing with Pyongyang's nuclear and missile capabilities problems. In constructing a robust deterrence system against North Korea's threats, while it is necessary for South Korea to have close security cooperation with Japan, the two nations are in long-time conflict about how to remember their history before World War II that results in remembrance incongruence. All in all, the situation surrounding South Korea and its neighbors seems anything but a fertile soil for building of a security community.

### **Structural Constraints on Seoul's Policy Autonomy**

Despite the national capabilities that South Korea has developed over the past twenty-five years, Seoul's autonomy of defense policy is likely to dwindle.<sup>15</sup> After overviewing South Korea's national capabilities, this section puts them in the East Asian regional contexts and shows that Sino-American security competition for regional hegemony, security-economy nexus originating from South Korea's trade dependence on China, and anti-Japanese nationalist sentiment among the South Korean public constitute the main determinants of Seoul's autonomy of defense policy.

South Korea has steadily nurtured its economic muscle since the end of the Cold War. While its gross domestic product (GDP) came close to 250 billion US dollars in 1989, the size has quintupled over the last quarter-century, amounting to nearly 1.4 trillion US dollars in 2015.

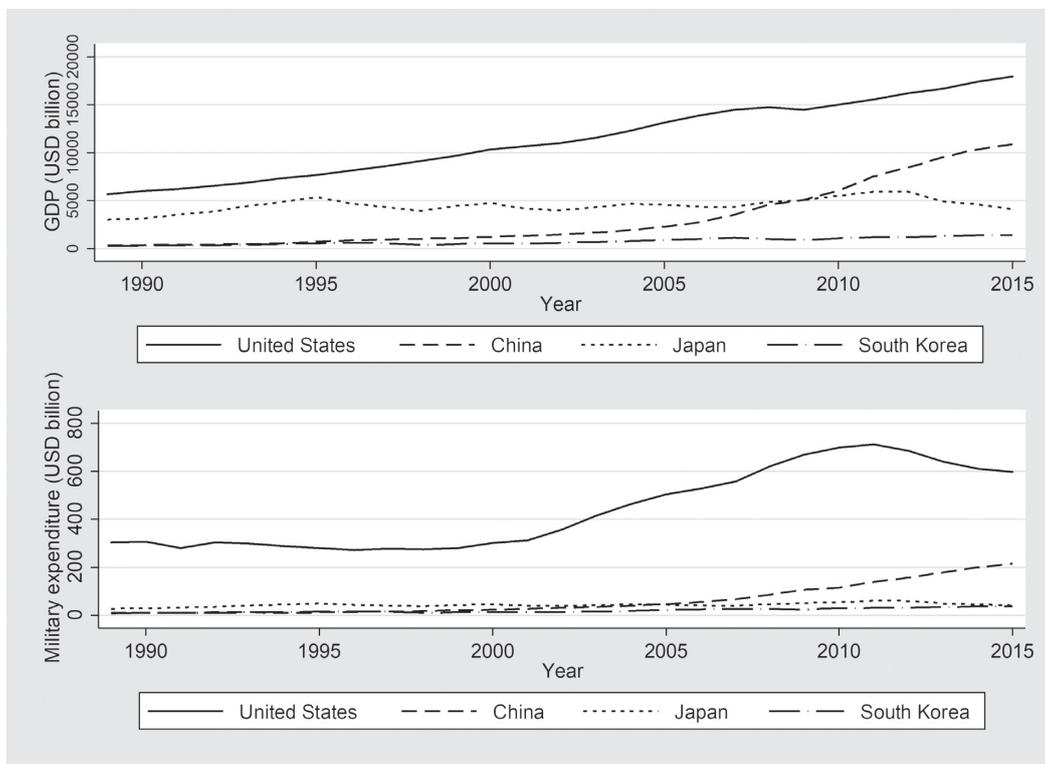
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14 Brad Glosserman and Scott A. Snyder, "Prospects for Japan-South Korea Cooperation Under Moon Jae-in," *Council on Foreign Relations' Asia Bound Blog*, June 2 (2017) available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/prospects-japan-south-korea-cooperation-under-moon-jae> (accessed on November 12, 2017); Brad Glosserman and Scott A. Snyder, *Japan-South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

15 Ashley J. Tellis, "Understanding Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific," *Strategic Asia 2016-17: Understanding Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2016).

As the eleventh largest economy in the world, it outperforms Russia, of which the GDP is about 1.3 trillion US dollars, or Spain, of which the figure is about 1.2 trillion US dollars.<sup>16</sup> South Korea has certainly cultivated its military prowess as well. Whereas its military expenditure approximated 9.5 billion US dollars in 1989, the volume has quadrupled in the past twenty-five years, reaching roughly 36 billion US dollars in 2015. As the world's tenth largest military spender, it outstrips Italy, of which the military expenditure is about 24 billion US dollars, and comes near to Germany, of which the figure is about 39 billion US dollars.<sup>17</sup> In short, during the post-Cold War period, South Korea has made itself a 'richer' nation and 'stronger' army. If the nation had inhabited a corner of the European Continent, it should have found its rightful place 'comparable' with Russia or Spain in the production of economic power, or Italy or Germany in the production of military power.<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 2 GDP and Military Expenditure in South Korea and Its Neighbors, 1989-2015**



Sources: For GDP, the World Bank open data available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD> (accessed on November 12, 2017); For military expenditure, military expenditure database of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute available at <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> All estimations are based on information of the World Bank open data available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> All estimations are based on information of the military expenditure database of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute available at <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, "Assessing National Power in Asia," Tellis, ed., *Strategic Asia 2015-16: Foundations of National Power in the Asia-Pacific* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2015).

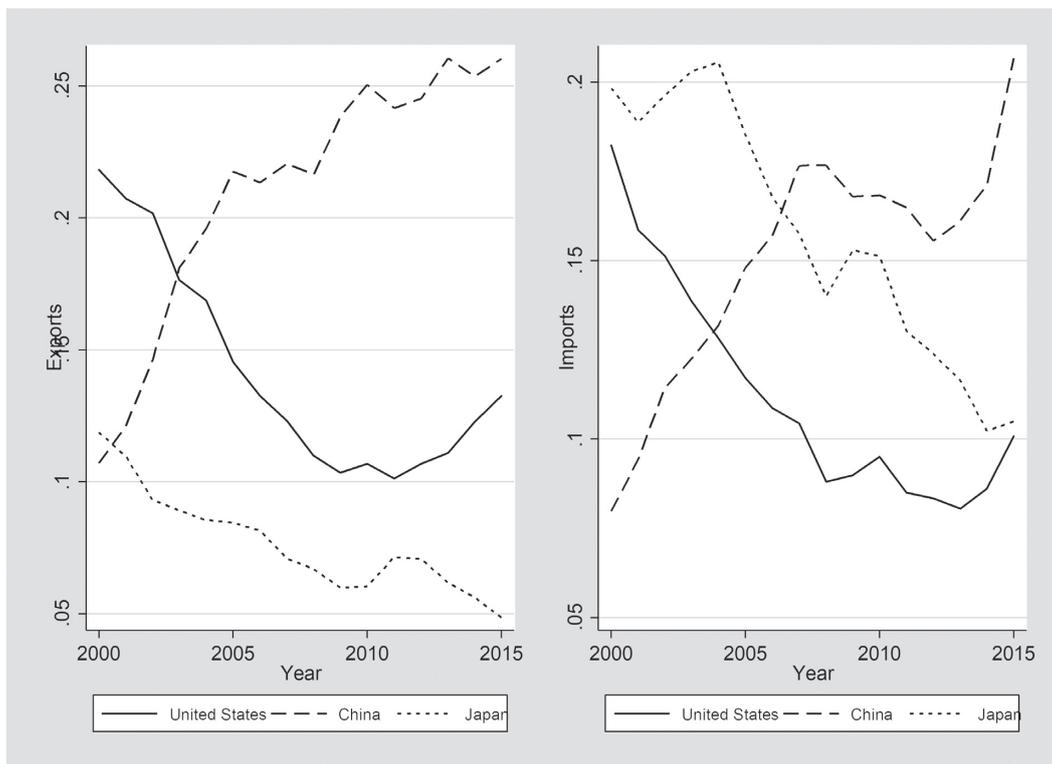
This counterfactual turns pale at the regional neighbors surrounding South Korea in East Asia. As shown in the upper panel of Figure 2, the country is encircled by the world's three largest economies: the United States, of which the GDP is about 18 trillion US dollars; China, of which the figure is about 11 trillion US dollars; and Japan, of which the figure is about 4 trillion US dollars. Unlike the European counterfactual in the realm of economic power production, the East Asian regional neighbors overshadow South Korea. Likewise, in the realm of military power production, as displayed in the lower panel of Figure 2, South Korea is encompassed by the world's top, second-, and eighth-largest military spenders: the United States, of which the military expenditure is about 600 billion US dollars; China, of which the figure is about 215 billion US dollars; and Japan, of which the figure is about 41 billion US dollars. Unlike the European counterfactual in the realm of military power production, the East Asian regional neighbors outshine South Korea. In short, South Korea is the smallest economic power and weakest military power in East Asia.

As a small and weak nation, South Korea is less likely to constrain the behavior of its regional neighbors; rather it is more likely to be constrained by the behavior of its regional neighbors. For starters, as shown in Figure 2, over the last quarter-century China has amplified its economic might by thirty times and military weight by nineteen times. During the same period, the United States has tripled its economic power and doubled its military power. As a result, China, surpassing Japan during the 2000s, catches up to 60 percent of the US economic capabilities and 36 percent of US military capabilities. Such game-changing power dynamics, according to the forecast of power transition theory, might produce, as a by-product of differential growth, the high potential for conflict between a challenger—China—and a dominant nation—the United States. The US 'rebalancing' policy to Asia and China's 'counter-balancing' policy manifest such a conflict potential.

This *Sino-American competition for regional hegemony* underlies security milieu surrounding South Korea and its neighbors in dealing with nuclear deadlock. In other words, what Seoul and Washington see as defensive actions against North Korea's military threat could be interpreted by Beijing as offensive actions against China's interest. The issue of THAAD is case in point. The hegemonic competition between the United States and China magnifies the regional implication of South Korea's defense policy toward nuclear-armed North Korea so as to produce centrifugal force that wedges between Seoul and Beijing. As Sino-America competition for regional hegemony intensifies, the situation for South Korea can degenerate into an awkward position that reduces Seoul's autonomy of defense policy.<sup>19</sup>

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19 Azriel Bermant and Igor Sutyagin, "Moving Forward with THAAD: Why Unpopular Deterrence is still Necessary," *Foreign Affairs*, August 21 (2017) available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2017-08-21/moving-forward-thaad> (accessed on November 12, 2017); Ellen Kim and Victor D. Cha, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: South Korea's Strategic Dilemmas with China and the United States," *Asia Policy*, no. 21 (2016).

**Figure 3 Trade Dependence of South Korea's Economy with Its Neighbors, 2000-2015**

Source: Trade statistics of Korea Customs Service available at [https://unipass.customs.go.kr:38030/ets/index\\_eng.do](https://unipass.customs.go.kr:38030/ets/index_eng.do) (available on November 12, 2017).

Second, the trade dependence of South Korea's economy is the highest—85 percent of the GDP in 2015—among the East Asian countries—41 percent of China; 37 percent of Japan; and 28 percent of the United States. South Korea's economic relations with its neighbors have ramifications beyond the realm of economic transactions.<sup>20</sup> As shown in Figure 3, the United States and Japan were the largest trading partners with South Korea in the early 2000s.

In 2000, 22 percent of South Korea's exports were destined to the United States and 12 percent to Japan. Likewise, 18 percent of South Korea's imports originated from the United States and 20 percent from Japan. China's share was 11 percent in exports and 8 percent in imports in the same year. Since the late 2000s, the trading picture has reversed. In 2015, 26 percent of South Korea's exports are destined to China, 13 percent to the United States, and 5 percent to Japan. Similarly, 21 percent of South Korea's imports originate from China, 11 percent from Japan, and 10 percent from the United States. Today, China is South Korea's largest trading partner.<sup>21</sup>

South Korea's trade dependence on China poses a distinctive *security-economy nexus* that is

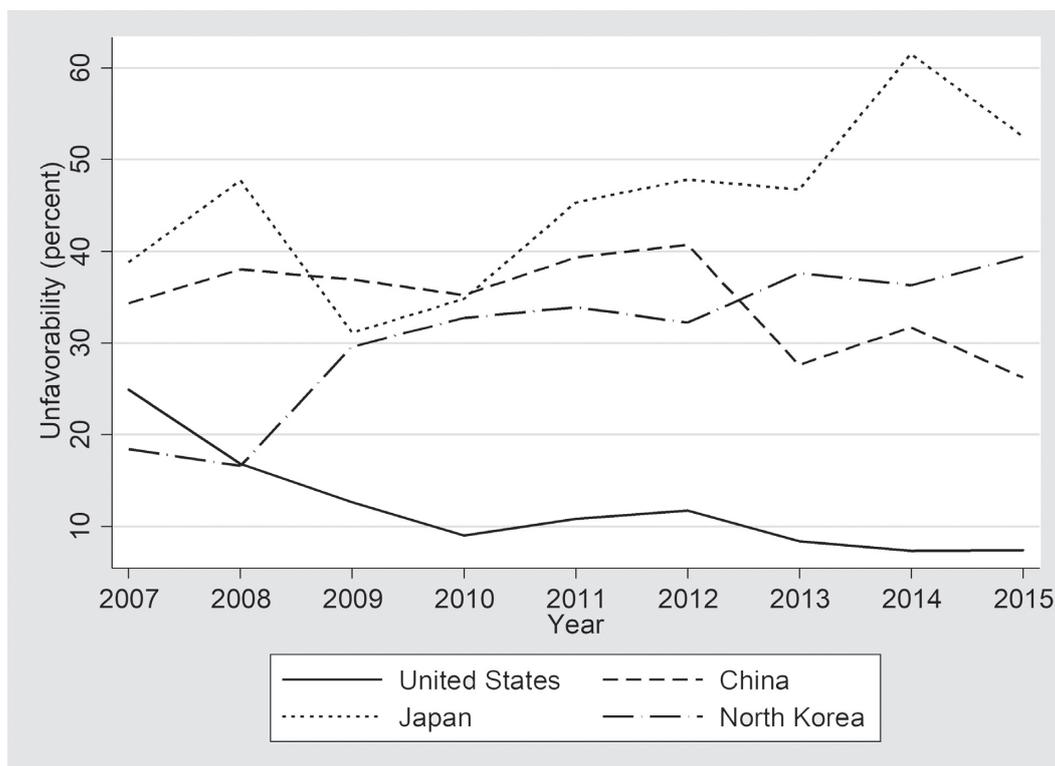
<sup>20</sup> All estimations are based on information of the World Bank open data available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.TRD.GNFS.ZS> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Jae Ho Chung and Jiyeon Kim, "Is South Korea in China's Orbit? Assessing Seoul's Perceptions and Policies," *Asia Policy*, no. 21 (2016).

mostly unfavorable to Seoul's defense policy autonomy. In addition to Sino-American hegemonic competition that makes it hard to decouple the defensive coordination between Seoul and Washington against Pyongyang from the offensive actions against Beijing, South Korea's unusual trade dependence on China is more likely to deteriorate South Korea's already-vulnerable defense posture.<sup>22</sup>

Last, as a vibrant democracy, Seoul's policymakers pay critical attention to the public's perception of their regional neighbors that can constrain the choices for national defense. Figure 4 illustrates longitudinal changes in South Koreans' unfavorable attitudes toward their neighbors. As for the United States, South Koreans have showed over the past ten years consistently low levels of unfavorability that declines from 25 percent in 2007 to 7 percent in 2015. As for Japan, by contrast, South Koreans have displayed unfailingly high levels of unfavorability that increases from 39 percent in 2007 to 53 percent in 2015. As for China, South Koreans have revealed gradually improving levels of unfavorability that decreases from 34 percent in 2007 to 26 percent in 2015. As for North Korea, South Koreans have indicated steadily worsening levels of unfavorability that increases from 18 percent in 2007 to 40 percent in 2015.

**Figure 4 South Koreans' Unfavorability toward Their Neighbors, 2007-2015**



Source: Unification attitude survey 2007-2015 of Seoul National University's Institute for Peace and Unification Studies available at <http://tongil.snu.ac.kr/ipus/> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Steven Denney, "South Korea's Economic Dependence on China," *Diplomat*, September 4 (2015) available at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/south-koreas-economic-dependence-on-china/> (accessed on November 12, 2017).

Here emerges another constraint on the defense policy autonomy of South Korea: The formation of trilateral security cooperation arrangements is desirable; but it seems very hard to forge a domestic political support base for such a policy plan due to the public's high level of negative attitude toward Japan. Note that the unfavorability toward Japan is even higher than that of North Korea. This South Korean public's *anti-Japanese nationalist sentiment* critically constrains the autonomy of Seoul's defense policy.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, South Korea's policy autonomy, by which Seoul can design a regional architecture for a security community and reconcile diverging security interests among its neighbors, is strongly constrained by international as well as domestic factors. Above all, any efforts of South Korea to build a security community must take into account the unpredictable impacts emanating from Sino-American competition for regional hegemony. As South Korea accommodates the rise of China, it distances itself from the security collaboration with Japan and the United States. Likewise, as South Korea takes counter-balancing measures with Japan and the United States, it starts to estrange China. When Seoul needs to put some distance from itself and Beijing, however, its high trade dependence is used by China as an effective leverage to counteract South Korea's balancing act. When Seoul wants to elaborate security cooperation with Tokyo as well as Washington, its strong anti-Japanese nationalist sentiment hinders South Korea from developing trilateral defense collaboration. All in all, structural constraints on South Korea's policy autonomy, be it international or domestic, are so substantial that Seoul can do little in constructing a security community in East Asia.

## Conclusion

In building a collective security organization among South Korea and its regional neighbors, there are a number of challenges for Seoul to cope with. With North Korea, South Korea has to resolve nuclear deadlock in which diplomatic solutions are not workable and military options are not feasible. With the United States, it has to manage alliance dilemma in which both entrapment and abandonment perils need to be prevented. With China, it has to deal with priority misalignment in which they have different preferences between denuclearization and regime change in Pyongyang. With Japan, it has to solve remembrance incongruence in which Seoul blames Tokyo for historical amnesia and Tokyo criticizes Seoul for apology fatigue.

In coping with these daunting challenges, Seoul's policy autonomy that makes critical assets for constructing the foundation of regional security community is under great strain internationally as well as domestically. South Korea's foreign policy strategies to design security architecture are shaped by Sino-American competition for regional hegemony that put Seoul in a position of hardship. To employ a hedging strategy, South Korea's foreign policy needs to be

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<sup>23</sup> Jung Kim, "Unravelling Japan-South Korean Relations: An Empirical Analysis," *Soka University Peace Research*, nos. 30/31 (2017).

flexible between China on the one hand and the United States and Japan on the other hand. The security-economy nexus created by trade dependence of South Korea on China, however, make it difficult for Seoul to move far away from Beijing. The anti-Japanese nationalist sentiment of the South Korean public narrows down Seoul's policy flexibility to move closer to Tokyo.

In a nutshell, South Korea, which has little latitude in developing policy autonomy and flexibility, is facing unprecedented security challenges with its regional neighbors. Under the situation confronting Seoul, South Korea seems unlikely to figure out a feasible path toward building a security community. To maintain regional peace, it is reasonable for South Korea and its regional neighbors to explore ways of security collaboration to preserve the status quo in East Asia.

