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Building Japan-ROK Relations through East Asian Maritime Security

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South Korea and Japan cannot afford to turn their backs on maritime disputes that could bring violent conflict to their doorsteps. Japan and South Korea's economies depend on a secure maritime environment to sustain large shipping, shipbuilding, and fishing industries, but their mutual interests are often overshadowed by chronic tension over historical legacies, limiting cooperation on maritime security and other defense issues. Past U.S. efforts have not been able to overcome political impasses and sustain constructive engagement between the two cornerstones of its alliance system in the Asia-Pacific.

While Japanese and South Korean leaders have recognized that better cooperation is necessary to address regional challenges, championing cooperation is politically difficult because of South Korea's historical sensitivities and general distrust of Japan. Regardless of the administration in power, South Korea's opposition parties are keen to use high-profile acts of cooperation, especially ones which must pass through the National Assembly, to rally the public against the ruling party, as seen with the failed 2012 General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). Japanese leaders have developed "Seoul fatigue" after repeated rejections from the ROK, discouraging new overtures. However, both would like to avoid the spillover effects from heightened tensions in the region and have also taken steps to reassert their security alignment with the United States. Maritime hotspots in the South China Sea have created an opportunity for Japan and South Korea to work together with the U.S. to establish a more stable region.

Naval cooperation has been a rare, bright spot in ROK-Japan relations. For example, the ROK Navy (ROKN) and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) worked around politics to address China's 2013 declaration of its ADIZ, Typhoon Haiyan disaster response, and counter-piracy activities in the Gulf of Aden. They have also conducted trilateral exercises with the U.S. Navy (USN). As Japan and the ROK continue to strengthen navy-to-navy relations, coast guard cooperation also provides an underexplored option to high-profile and militarized cooperation. A potential summit between PM Abe and President Park this fall presents an opportunity to both leaders to recognize the value of coast guard cooperation and maritime capacity building in addressing regional security challenges and furthering their regional policy agendas.

The relationship between the Korean and Japanese Coast Guards was first established in a 1965 agreement on fishery management. In 1999, Japan and South Korea signed an MOU to hold annual meetings between the coast guards, and they have conducted combined search and rescue (SAR) exercises since 2007. Other events at sea, such as tracking illegal fishing vessels, continue to require daily communication and coordination between the JCG and KCG. Additionally, both forces are fully capable of leading and working in conjunction with the USCG on activities to enhance maritime law

Amanda Conklin, Sora Chung, Grace Kim, and Nicole Goertzen-Tang, recent graduates from the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, explain that "Maritime hotspots in the South China Sea have created an opportunity for Japan and South Korea to work together with the U.S. to establish a more stable region."

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enforcement and defense capacity of smaller countries in East Asia. While the KCG immediately shied away from international attention following the disastrous 2014 *MV Sewol* ferry sinking, it has since hosted coast guard contingents from Southeast Asia for training.

Although past instances of Japan-ROK coast guard cooperation have resulted in positive contributions to regional fishery management; SAR; humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR); and activities to combat a number of illegal activities, the value of coast guards remains underappreciated. For instance, due to size and budget constraints, the U.S. Coast Guard has a limited reach in responding to security concerns in the Asia-Pacific. In order to compensate, the USCG has pushed for increased cooperation among its counterparts in East Asia. However, the U.S. government has not articulated a roadmap and toolkit for Japan and South Korea to raise the ceiling of their past maritime security cooperation into a vision for sustained political cooperation. Improving regional maritime security through short-term capacity building and cultivating greater ROK-Japan cooperation in the long-term could be accomplished through the following:

- ◆ Developing information-sharing centers to address regional problems and **promote common standards of behavior in the region**, through multilateral institutions like the North Pacific Coast Guard Forum (NPCGF) or Heads of Asian Coast Guards Annual Meeting (HACGAM)
- ◆ Strengthening trends to **build maritime law enforcement capacity** in Southeast Asia, **focusing contributions on the individual strengths of the U.S., Japan, and South Korea** – i.e. the U.S. should focus on shipbuilding inspections, port security, and operational and development planning; Japan on operational and shipbuilding expertise, and hardware; and South Korea on shipbuilding expertise and technology.
- ◆ Institutionalizing **U.S.-ROK-Japan** maritime security exercises focusing on nontraditional security issues and encouraging annual participation in multilateral exercises in the region
- ◆ Holding **Track 1.5/2 discussions** on maritime law enforcement and security between regional security experts, coast guard and naval officers, and government officials.
- ◆ Systematizing **integrated maritime domain awareness**, examining the European Union’s I2C maritime security and surveillance program and Japanese-initiated Regional Framework on Combatting Piracy and Armed Robbery (ReCAAP) for best practices and lessons learned
- ◆ Institutionalizing **annual ROK-Japan Head of State Summits** to de-politicize these activities for future administrations
- ◆ Supporting **Japanese and Korean defense modernization** to ensure complementary security postures

These recommendations alone are not meant to resolve the historical issues plaguing ROK-Japan relations, but maritime cooperation is politically feasible and, if successful, may lay the foundations for further diplomatic progress. U.S. policymakers should expect periods of slow progress or derailment on cooperation activities between the ROK and Japan. However, it is important to emphasize the reinforcing nature of the benefits of efforts towards a better alliance relations and a secure maritime environment in the Asia-Pacific. The more opportunities the U.S. can create for engagement and slowly raise the ceiling of cooperation, the greater the opportunity for a more secure maritime environment and more robust alliance system in Asia over the long-term.

The authors are all recent graduates of the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, and would like to thank all the policymakers and academics whose interviews were indispensable to the development of these policy recommendations. Amanda Conklin can be reached at conklin.am@gmail.com. Sora Chung can be reached at sorachung@gwu.edu. Grace Kim can be reached at graceyk@gwu.edu. Nicole Goertzen-Tang can be reached at ndavika@gwu.edu.