

**SOUTH KOREA-JAPAN RELATIONS IN
THE 2010s: AMBIVALENT STRATEGIC
AND ECONOMIC PARTNERS?**

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Executive Summary

1. From the United States' strategic perspective, the cooperation between its South Korean and Japanese allies, important components of the US hub-and-spokes architecture, is indispensable to the region's stability.
2. On 19 April 2019, the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (SCC: 2+2) meeting in Washington DC declared: "The Ministers also highlighted the importance of cooperation among the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, and committed to work together to promote trilateral security cooperation and exercises".
3. To Japan, South Korea is an important buffer and frontline state against nuclearising North Korea. To South Korea, Japan hosts important US military bases and provides critical logistical support to US forces abroad including the vicinity of the Korean theatre of operations.
4. While Seoul and Tokyo are liberal democracies, US allies, economically intertwined and strategic partners in Northeast Asia, disputes on history and Dokdo/Takeshima issues have often marred and strained South Korea-Japan relations and cooperation especially in the context of domestic politics.
5. Presumably, South Korean state and society are increasingly more willing to stand up to Japan on various issues, in part, due to decreasing dependence on Japan economically and technologically. In contrast to Japan, China has increased its influence in South Korea since the 1990s.
6. Unlike Japan, South Korea is likely to see China as an economic opportunity rather than a security threat. Therefore, Seoul is quite cautious about bandwagoning with Tokyo and Washington against Beijing. South Korea hopes that China can restrain North Korea and facilitate dialogues between the North and the United States to lessen tension in the Korean peninsula.

7. Many South Koreans also perceive another power shift in Northeast Asia in favour of South Korea. Indeed, South Korea has risen while Japan has suffered from long-term economic doldrums since 1991.
8. Arguably, South Korea, a Newly Industrialising Economy during the Cold War era, was a “student” of the Japanese economic superpower. The Korean “student” today has proudly overtaken the Japanese “master” in certain technological fields through grit and ingenuity.
9. It is unclear whether Korean reunification is possible within the next few decades, in the event of which, developmental assistance from Japan will still be useful. It is not inconceivable that Japan can be a partner to a unified Korea in the future.