# Why Did South Korea & Japan Not Become Like France and Germany? Questions of Historical Memory, Security, and the Search for Stability

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***Abstract:*** *South Korea and Japan paradoxically struggle with persistent historical conflicts that undermine their bilateral relationship despite economic, political, and cultural incentives alongside a shared US-led alliance in the face of common threats. This paper delves into why these nations have not achieved the stable security relationships seen between post-war European states like France and Germany. I argue that diverging historical memories, the cyclical nature of South Korean politics, misaligned threat perceptions, and a lack of early, binding institutional frameworks prevented a similar outcome. While outright resolution of historical disputes remains elusive, I propose a path for managing these tensions: leveraging fundamental commonalities through low-risk, informal cultural exchanges. Such people-to-people initiatives can foster cross-border affinity, reducing domestic political incentives for antagonism and enabling the strategic compartmentalization of historical grievances. Should this succeed, the resulting institutional 'lock-ins' in the security realm would raise the cost of future policy reversals, forming the bedrock for a more formalized, consolidated, and durable security arrangement.*

**Keywords***: South Korea–Japan relations; historical memory; path dependency; alliance theory; cultural diplomacy; institutionalization; reconciliation.*

## Introduction

The Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan have a paradoxical relationship. Economically, both countries have rapidly industrialized to become global leaders, sharing the notions of free trade and capitalism. Politically, they are liberal democracies that are committed to fundamental rights and freedoms and allow for political pluralism. As in much of East Asia, Confucianism and Chinese influence have had a historically profound impact on both nations, while their proximity to each other meant that contacts between the two had been established for centuries. Modern-day cultural exchange represents another notable mutual link. Most importantly, South Korea and Japan are firmly linked by and fully integrated in the United States alliance system, sharing common security threats like the North Korean nuclear program. Given these longstanding uniting factors, the paper asks the following question: Why do historical conflicts

between the countries continue to flare up and undermine bilateral relations, preventing the emergence of a stable security relationship and potentially hindering both countries' national security and economic interests?

European nations successfully overcame their most pressing issues in the post-war period, rallying together to incrementally build close economic and security unions that span large parts of the continent. Germany was able to transform its historical guilt into successful and stable security relationships with its neighbors, such as France and Poland. This paper will scrutinize the efforts taken by European, South Korean, and Japanese leaders to understand why historical conflicts continue to paralyze or outright damage bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan. It identifies diverging historical memory cultures, cyclical South Korean politics, differing threat perceptions, and the absence of binding institutional frameworks as the main obstacles.

In attempting to explain this puzzle, this paper does not claim to offer definitive solutions to these issues that have long frustrated policymakers and defied resolution for decades. It will, however, attempt to find avenues for leveraging fundamental commonalities to alleviate these disputes to an extent that makes future escalation less likely and less desired. It posits that establishing closer links through informal cultural initiatives can foster cross-border affinity, which in turn reduces domestic political incentives for antagonism and enables the compartmentalization of historical conflicts. If achieved, resulting institutional lock-ins increase the cost for deviation in the security realm. These developments can then serve as the basis for a more formalized security arrangement that is consolidated and durable.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Approach

Existing literature on European reconciliation focuses on the institutionalization and the way leaders hoped to leverage these for rebuilding. West Germany's post-war Westpolitik sought to prevent Germany from becoming a battleground between the two camps in the Cold War. The United States readily supported rehabilitation efforts, while West Germany saw the inclusion into Western institutions as a way to rebuild its standing. Western European nations regarded Germany's inclusion in its newly set-up institutions as imperative for containing it. With NATO and the precursors to the EU, these included both economic and security institutions. According to Alice Ackermann, German leaders aimed to build consistent foreign policy patterns in this way. For France, the lack of UK and US support for its hardline stance against Germany and the emergence of the Soviet threat after the war produced a willingness to integrate and therefore institutionally contain it. While track-two diplomacy played a role, pragmatic security cooperation accounted for the rapid pace of

reconciliation in post-war Europe. Eventually, the longstanding Franco-German rivalry turned from antagonistic to cooperative. The two largest continental powers in the Western part of the Cold War divide in Europe accordingly reconciled due to a combination of rapid institutionalization to create trust, predictability, and containment, as well as a shared security threat in the East.

In addition, scholars point to earnest bilateral efforts made under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, illustrating German sincerity in confronting its past. This combination of bilateral and multilateral integration then translated into acceptance of German rearmament and the immediate start of military cooperation. Lily Feldman found that public opinion regarding France only turned optimistic after the Adenauer leadership initiated the reconciliation process. She further points out that when Chancellor Willy Brandt initiated his signature Ostpolitik in the following years, the resulting societal exchanges, for example via the respective churches, played a vital role in fostering a positive environment of goodwill. These policy initiatives further demonstrated Germany's seriousness toward addressing its past. Lastly, in the East, symbolic acts like Brandt's kneeling at the memorial for the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in December 1970 amplified the restoration of ties. This illustrates how credible foreign policy approaches by both sides and symbolic acts by West German chancellors aided the reconciliation efforts.

The discourse on conflicts between South Korea and Japan follows a different trajectory, usually pointing out the historical backgrounds and reasons for how and why the conflicts remain unsolved. Chris Deacon points out how differing discourses in both countries lead to diverging perceptions and that many scholars regard this as inescapable. Literature has long tried to solve or argue for the difficulty of solving these issues. Deacon himself was mainly concerned with explaining the periodic escalations and persistence of tense relations. Ji Young Kim analyzed the identity clashes that get reproduced between the Japanese political elite and the South Korean public, concluding that attitudes were deeply entrenched and unlikely to change in the near future. Such conflicts have also been attested to the persistence of hierarchical social structures, transferred to inter-state relationships, and amplified in the Japanese case after the successful modernization of the country. Economic realities in the immediate post-war period turned Korea into a place of little concern to the Japanese, whereas education on Japan in Korea remained limited due to the negative impressions from the colonial period. Perceptions of each other were thus hampered by a lack of interest in understanding the other side, leaving sharp contrasts in the respective internalization of history. Jungmin Seo likewise highlighted that identity was relational, and Japanese leaders reproduced the country's image of superiority vis-à-vis South Korea. It has been argued that the synthesis of Korean national identity was in large part a result of anti-Japanese sentiments, whereas Japan's modern identity was a product of

its perceived superior standing over the rest of Asia after the Meiji Restoration. In turn, their national identities are interdependent, making conventional conflict-solving strategies difficult.

The countries' main historical issues concern the Liancourt Rocks (Dokdo/Takeshima), and the memory and compensation of the Comfort Women and forced laborers under Japanese colonial rule. The 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty left the ownership of the Liancourt Rocks ambiguous, with both sides claiming the islets, but South Korea exercising effective sovereignty over them. According to President Roh Moo-hyun, Dokdo became a symbol of Korea's territorial restoration, and remains a highly contentious issue in bilateral relations, including for economic reasons. Actors on both sides leveraged the issue to attract support. The Comfort Women and forced labor conflicts had more consequential impacts on bilateral relations and will be discussed in succeeding chapters.

Historically, another area of contention has been South Korea's and Japan's security relations. While both states had aligned security interests under their patron, the US, the extent of their threat perceptions differed. Japan, for instance, cooperated economically with North Korea, sparking abandonment concerns in the South. Likewise, Japan faced potential entrapment by committing more to South Korea, fearing strong North Korean responses. In contrast, literature suggests that Western Europe had little incentive to diverge as it shared one clear, common threat. In Europe, a shared institution, NATO, solidified this position, whereas in East Asia, merely sharing a patron in the US did not produce the same effect.

While this literature helps explain why historical issues persist, it underemphasizes the security dynamics that offer space for cooperation despite unresolved history. Identifying gaps in the existing literature must therefore focus on approaches that do not attempt complete resolutions or seek possible emulations of European reconciliation. Rather, one must seek mechanisms that allow for the effective management of these issues and not resort to fatalism and assuming they will resolve over time. Arguing that it is impossible to resolve all historical problems to every stakeholder's satisfaction, as I will later illustrate, the question of why Europeans built enduring security ties while the Republic of Korea and Japan did not remains insufficiently answered.

This paper employs a comparative historical analysis to scrutinize why the post-war trajectories of security relationships between France and Germany and between South Korea and Japan diverged. I offer a security-focused path dependency approach. Path dependency makes course reversals increasingly difficult, which pertains to both converging European and diverging East Asian policy choices and the institutional environment in the post-war period. In

addition, alliance theory can help understand how these early decisions led to different trajectories and what the effects of a future reshape could be. Security perceptions tend to align over the course of an alliance's persistence when facing a common adversary. Alliances also serve as a tether that creates mutual interdependence. Harmonizing a combination of these factors enables policymakers to coordinate relations in a more stable way. Comparing the strength in security relations between major US allies in two vital regions can offer valuable insights into alliance-building and reconciliation.

The causal relationship in this analysis is one of path dependency stemming from initial conditions. Unlike the European experience, differing threat perceptions and diverging historical memories from the outset prevented an early move toward binding institutional frameworks between South Korea and Japan. First, the absence of a shared existential threat and unresolved historical disputes meant there was no powerful incentive to overcome political divisions through institutional integration. Second, without such frameworks, security policies in both countries remained independent and highly susceptible to domestic political factors. Third, this failure to institutionalize early created a path-dependent trajectory in which bilateral ties became locked into cycles of mistrust, reinforced by South Korea's political alternations and factional tensions within Japan's ruling party. In the European example, institutional routines could shape common responses to shared threats, with deviations becoming costly and impractical. Finally, only as security threats increasingly converge around North Korea and China has a new opportunity for institutionalization emerged, provided that cultural stabilizers mitigate the risk of future policy reversals.

In formulating my arguments, I will use the term compartmentalization to mean a development that separates issues that are practically unrelated to one another, such as discussions about how to deal with the past and national security. The term cultural affinity will denote the creation of a mutually positive sentiment in the sense of track-two diplomacy, soft power, and cultural exchanges, serving as the basis for future progress. Lastly, historical memory in this paper refers to the way both countries deal with their past and how their respective narratives shape the surrounding debates.

## The Post-War Period

As outlined, the trajectory of Franco-German and ROK-Japan relations diverged soon after the Second World War ended. West German integration into Europe's new institutions was supported by the United States. Ties with France warmed through immediate institutionalization and bloc-building. The shared threat of the Soviet Union and Communism more broadly proved to be an

attractive driver for rapprochement. German apologies westward were instant and credible, and those eastward were symbolic and consistent. The country's economy in the post-war years enhanced its attractiveness and cemented economic interdependence and benefits.

Developments in post-war ROK-Japan relations differed in several important aspects. Unlike France or Poland for Germany, the Korean peninsula was a Japanese colony. This different status meant that South Korea was excluded from significant post-war settlements, including the San Francisco Peace Treaty. Especially after the Communist takeover of China, the United States tried to establish Japan as its regional bastion against the spread of Communism in Asia. This meant that conditions for Japan could not be too harsh and the peace treaty had to be signed quickly, with decisions on rearmament following in quick succession. The US occupation played a major role in Japan's post-war orientation. Compared to Europe, where German rearmament was allowed for with tacit but careful French approval, Japan's post-war security arrangement was largely settled bilaterally between Japan itself and the US. The tumultuous circumstances in Northeast Asia at the time would not allow for any regional integration beyond the US, ROK, and Japan. Within the context of the end of the Chinese Civil War, the start of the Cold War, and the outbreak of the Korean War, institutionalization did not take place, and threat perceptions differed as well. The early Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership — and the United States — were more concerned about the ensuing Cold War and the actions of the Soviet Union in Asia than South Korea. This complicated formulating a shared security agenda.

In contrast to the actions of German and French leaders, Korean and Japanese leaders displayed less goodwill toward each other. Symbolic gestures akin to Brandt's kneeling did not happen, and the exclusion from immediate post-war settlements did not resonate well with a nation that had been under traumatizing colonial rule for 35 years. Sovereignty issues stemming from the division of Korea and unresolved fishery disputes kept relations tense. The ROK's first president, Rhee Syngman, a longstanding independence activist, thus found fertile ground to effectively leverage his anti-Japanese narrative during his tenure from 1948 to 1960. While US support for rapprochement between its two main Asian allies existed, I argue that the lack of institutionalizing their relationship and the unwillingness of their leaders to relent prevented the relationship from evolving successfully, as was the case in Europe. President Rhee's hardline stance, paired with unapologetic statements regarding supposed economic benefits from colonial rule by Japanese negotiators, stalled normalization talks for most of the 1950s. Without official bilateral ties and lingering Japanese questions over the territorial extent of recognition of South Korean sovereignty, stability, continuity, and predictability were difficult to achieve in the early years. Additionally, Germany and France share a land border and

have both historically been sizable economies. Trade of commodities like coal and steel provided incentives for cooperation. However, early Japanese leaders, such as Yoshida Shigeru, did not view South Korea as a vital partner in Japan's post-war reconstruction. The two countries had little economic interaction in the post-war period, as Korea was not yet industrialized and perceived by Japanese elites as having limited strategic or economic value. This contributed to Tokyo's lack of urgency in addressing colonial grievances or building structured ties with Seoul. The United States proved to be much more central to Japanese economic and security considerations and was sufficient for those purposes.

The immediate post-war reconciliation and institutional lock-ins in Europe became so strong that they continue to hold to this day. Conversely, post-war conditions between South Korea and Japan proved so contentious that they led to their paths diverging. These early differences laid the groundwork for path-dependent trajectories in both regions, with Europe consolidating reconciliation through institutions and Northeast Asia lacking comparable mechanisms of trust-building.

## Cyclical South Korean Politics and Factional Tensions in the LDP

The removal of President Rhee from office in 1960 and the subsequent coup that brought Park Chung Hee to the presidency finally enabled both states to normalize relations in 1965. Unlike the former, Park had gone through Japanese education, spoke the language, and was eager to leverage Japan's economic capital and experience for his ambitions. These two early leaders foreshadowed the cyclical dynamic that would later define South Korean politics. Modern political debate in the country is shaped by its two major parties that both hold opposing views on how to engage with Japan and pursue historical justice.

As noted, Germany and its European partners demonstrated remarkable continuity in their foreign policy approaches. Ostpolitik and Westpolitik were pursued across party lines by chancellors from both major political parties. For Japan, the LDP ruled for most of the post-war period, with only brief interruptions. This allows for continuity, predictability, and more solid assurances for any agreements made. Despite persistent nationalist elements in the party and among recent prime ministers, Japan has made efforts to address historical issues with the ROK, most notably in the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement.

Without institutional continuity, however, course reversals were possible and

have affected bilateral relations after democratization. This illustrated the pattern set by the anti-Japan President Rhee and the more Japan-friendly President Park. No binding institutional frameworks meant that undoing deals incurred little actual cost. As there are no clear mechanisms in place that provide incentives to invest in stability, the South Korean liberal administrations could easily reverse agreements made in the previous conservative administration. The clearest example of this phenomenon occurred during the Moon Jae-in administration, when he withdrew from the fund the previous government had set up to settle the compensation of former comfort women. In tandem with court rulings against Japan on forced labor compensation, this triggered a trade war. As pointed out, course reversals like these frustrate the LDP leadership, and potentially lead to less willingness among the party to put in the effort to resolve these conflicts, given the inconsistent nature of South Korean policy toward Japan. Crucially, such reversals potentially provide arguments to those elements in Japan that advocate more cautious or hardline stances toward Seoul. Early institutional integration allowed all major German parties to formulate a consistent approach for reconciliation. Japan's relative political continuity could have served as a similar basis, but South Korean shifting administrations left agreements vulnerable to future reversals.

As mentioned above, however, the LDP had historically been constituted of different factions that advocated for different approaches concerning the country's past and neighborly relations. The current prime minister and his four immediate LDP predecessors have all been associated with Nippon Kaigi. This is an ultranationalist group that wields considerable influence over the LDP, as many of the party's members are also affiliated with the group. Nippon Kaigi promotes a nationalist narrative of Japan's past, and advocates for visits to Yasukuni Shrine, which honors the war dead – including high-profile war criminals. While no recent LDP prime minister has yet decided to visit the shrine since Prime Minister Abe in 2013, those who had done so before were confronted with significant backlash from countries like South Korea and China, severely straining relations over this issue. Takaichi Sanae, coming second in the latest LDP leadership election, vowed to visit the shrine as prime minister, demonstrating the risk of relations being undermined from the Japanese side as well.

Therefore, while the two major parties in South Korea represent a clear, cyclical shift in policy, the LDP's internal dynamics represent a persistent factor that determines the degree and tone of Japan's engagement with South Korea. The ongoing friction between these – now mostly dissolved – factions is an equally important domestic factor to consider, as it can both enable and constrain diplomatic progress regardless of who holds the office.

## Cultural Affinity as an Informal Stabilizer

A low-risk approach to creating positive environments between two nations proposes people-to-people exchanges, broadly falling under the term of track-two diplomacy. This can include a wide array of societal and cultural contacts built in areas including academia, pop culture, or sports. Joseph Nye has demonstrated the positive effects of soft power: increasing cultural affinity through various existing and potential future avenues lays the groundwork for positive political influence. Returning to the European example, the continent has been bound together by a shared passion for football, with nations and clubs in relatively short proximity playing each other regularly. Together with formats like Eurovision, they enable low-risk cultural engagement across borders.

Tourism between Japan and South Korea has grown exponentially, with tourist numbers exceeding 12 million in 2024. This means that significant shares of both societies have come into close contact with one another, likely fostering familiarity with each other's cultures and the erosion of stereotypes. Noticeable is the relatively lower, yet still significant, number of Japanese tourists to South Korea, which marks potential for growth. Younger demographics are represented proportionately higher, alluding to generational changes. Both countries also put a fast entry system in place to celebrate their sixtieth anniversary of bilateral ties.

Beyond physical exchange, the flow of pop culture represents a key driver in cultural relations. Japanese video games, anime, and manga have become a staple in South Korea despite their longstanding ban having only been fully lifted around the turn of the millennium. Japanese anime has since been a constant feature in Korea. Concurrently, *hallyu* in the form of K-dramas and K-pop albums recorded exponentially growing sales over the past years. Leading South Korean acts performed in Tokyo Dome, which is known for hosting major events in the country. These developments signify bottom-up demand for each other's cultures. If promoted, they generate public constituencies that can serve as domestic buffers to mitigate future trade conflicts and boycotts. Due to geographic proximity and mutual interest, regular joint events in the form of music festivals or pop culture conventions can create opportunities to interact with each other in a positive context.

Academic exchanges constitute another key component. It offers young people a chance to familiarize themselves with each other as well as to learn the language. The large number of South Korean students in Japan is a positive sign. Increasing the relatively low number of Japanese students in South Korea will also be a necessary factor to promote knowledge about the country in Japan.

Another commonality between both countries is their passion for baseball and football. Jointly hosting the 2002 FIFA World Cup had been a major success that can be capitalized on. Bidding for future events can harmonize relations between stakeholders in host cities, sports associations, organizers, and players. Sports provide an opportunity to foster respectful rivalries within a framework of shared passions. Institutionalizing informal programs like annual friendlies between national teams or a Korea-Japan series between the champions of both countries' baseball leagues might be approaches that lead to regular exchanges. Such initiatives aim to contribute to a transformation from antagonistic perception to one of respectful rivalry — a psychological shift that underpins long-term stabilization.

The efficacy of such low-intensity cultural exchanges on bilateral relations can be observed via the following correlation: as the consumption of each other's culture rises, so do the favorable public attitudes. South Koreans' exponential increase in positive attitudes toward Japan, together with rising tourist numbers since 2023, especially among young demographics that are the primary consumers of Japanese pop culture, are notable factors. Young Japanese also seem to be developing a more positive image of South Korea, manifesting in rising export value and sold-out concerts of K-pop artists all over Japan and the increasing popularity of Korean dramas. Though smaller in scale, similar upward developments can be seen in the presence of J-pop in South Korea. Recent Japanese animated movies like Slam Dunk and Suzume drew millions of South Koreans into cinemas, becoming the two most successful movies of their genre in the country, further illustrating this trend. Once relations overcame the trade dispute, the more positive environment seemed to allow for increasing exchanges in culture and tourism, clearly in parallel with improving mutual perceptions.

## Institutionalization and Compartmentalization

I argue that the developments and proposals above do not resolve outstanding conflicts themselves, but create affective goodwill, reduce the political capital of antagonism, and lay the foundation for institutional cooperation. The previous trade war likely served as a learning experience for the political elites and society, as a situation not to be repeated. However, the longstanding inability to resolve historical issues makes short-term future settlements unlikely. Consistent positive efforts and time via generational change must serve as central factors. Because no one actor has a monopoly on the interpretation of history, conflicts prove difficult to resolve permanently. In the European case, the Polish conservatives still demand reparations from Germany.

The above findings suggest the viability of a strategy of active management

over forced permanent settlement. I argue that the concepts of track-two diplomacy and soft power serve as arguments for taking said approach. Low-risk and low-input cultural initiatives, private and public sector exchanges, tourism, and the interest in each other's culture and the resulting reduction of stereotypes aid in this process. They can contribute to a political environment less conducive to antagonism, which may result in goodwill in negotiations and reduce the political capital for actors like the Korean liberals to antagonize Japan.

This could then enable the more moderate political elements of both countries to take bolder steps to more formal institutionalization of ties, in areas such as security. As demonstrated, the European case has been difficult to replicate in East Asia. But increased US efforts in formalizing ties, combined with less popular opposition in Japan and South Korea to such developments, can allow Korean conservative administrations to take bolder steps in that direction. Increasing institutionalization may start with elevating the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) into an intelligence alliance or introducing joint contingency planning regarding North Korea.

In turn, once formalized and consolidated, institutional binding will make it increasingly costly for future administrations to overturn such decisions. In such a case, course reversals would not only affect relations with Japan but also the US. Ultimately, as mentioned in this paper's early remarks, threat perceptions among members may well converge in such circumstances. The North Korean nuclear program can serve as the smallest common denominator here, as do recent Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific and the Russia-North Korea security alliance. This increasingly compels both nations to seek closer security cooperation.

The resulting shared understanding of regional threat, ripple effects from cultural exchange, and a stable institutionalized environment may facilitate conditions in which historical conflicts persist but become unlikely to escalate. Affinity, institutional ties, and increasing mutual security dependence could allow for a climate of compartmentalization of historical conflicts and national interests. This can be seen in Europe: despite the Polish conservatives' reparation demands, they do not undermine European security relations.

## Conclusion

Key differences in post-war circumstances account for the different trajectories of security relations and reconciliation in Europe and between South Korea and Japan. Economic incentives, land borders, and political support from most of the political spectrum for reconciliation spurred rapid institutionalization in

Europe. Security concerns about potentially uncontrolled German rearmament and a new, common threat from the Soviet Union further amplified this. South Korea and Japan lacked most of these components in the immediate post-war period, but circumstances today are vastly different. Perceptions on security issues increasingly converge around the North Korean nuclear program, the renewed security alliance between Moscow and Pyongyang, Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, and even a potential partial return to isolationism by the US. Both countries could profit from closer relations, for example, by lobbying for South Korean membership in the G7, which would put more emphasis on the region globally. Both are advanced economies and liberal democracies with other challenges, such as demographics, that make cooperation not just desirable but increasingly necessary. Rather than attempting full resolution of memory conflicts, this paper suggests mechanisms for managing them through strategic compartmentalization. By incrementally building on institutional lock-ins made possible through improved cultural affinity, ties can be stabilized, and escalation potential harming national and security interests can be defused. In turn, drastic shifts in bilateral relations will be less likely to occur as costs increase, benefits decline, and views on shared threats converge. The softening of these two variables then paves the way for a potential institutionalization of ties. Lasting reconciliation need not begin with historical issues but with cooperation despite them.

## Acknowledgment of Funding

Research for this article was undertaken while the author held a fellowship from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

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