

**Leading the Way**  
**USINDOPACOM's Role Amid South Korean-Japanese Tensions**

Submitted for the *Matthew C. Perry Award for International Research* Essay Competition

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<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> Following the Korean War, the US forged an Asian alliance structure with South Korea and Japan. This structure served as the foundation for today's regional security framework, which still serves to deter North Korean and Chinese aggression. Unfortunately, recently escalating tensions between South Korea and Japan threaten to undo that security framework. This paper argues that US policymakers should leverage USINDOPACOM amid these escalating tensions to maintain a working relationship between these key alliance partners. Policymakers should leverage USINDOPACOM because US strategy requires healthy relationships between alliance partners to succeed, because the South Korean-Japanese relationship requires outside intervention to function, and because operational-level intervention offers opportunities unavailable at the strategic-political level. The paper goes on to recommend solutions USINDOPACOM can implement to strengthen the alliance structure.						
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## INTRODUCTION

“We are all stronger—and Northeast Asia is safer—when the United States, Japan, and Korea work together in solidarity and friendship.”  
-- Pentagon spokesman Lt Col Eastburn<sup>1</sup>

On July 23, 2019, South Korean F-15s and F-16s scrambled to the skies, racing to intercept a coordinated wave of Russian and Chinese bombers that crossed South Korea’s Air Defense Intercept Zone (ADIZ) and over flew the contested Dokdo/Takeshima Islands.<sup>2</sup> The interceptors issued radio broadcasts, dropped flares, and fired hundreds of warning rounds before pushing the bombers back across the ADIZ.<sup>3</sup> In the process of protecting their airspace, however, the South Koreans ignited an international firestorm. It appears that China, seizing an opportunity to widen the rift between two of the US’s most important allies in the region, orchestrated this combined flyover of the Korean-administered islands. Japan, who also claims ownership of the islands, responded in a manner that played right into China’s playbook. Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga denounced South Korea’s reaction as “totally unacceptable and extremely regrettable,” decrying South Korea’s decision to intercept bombers over territory that Japan also claims as its own.<sup>4</sup> Tokyo issued this rebuff amidst escalating tensions with Seoul that re-ignited in October 2018 with a South Korean legal ruling against Japanese companies, evolved into a trade war, and accelerated when Seoul severed a bilateral

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Shorrock, “In a Major Shift, South Korea Defies Its Alliance with Japan,” *The Nation*, August 27, 2019, accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/south-korea-japan-cold-war/>.

<sup>2</sup> Evan Reese, "South Korea, Russia: What to Make of a Midair Interception Over Disputed Waters," *Stratfor*, July 23, 2019, accessed September 19, 2019, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/south-korea-russia-what-make-midair-interception-over-disputed-waters-china-japan-warning-shots>.

<sup>3</sup> "Russia and South Korea Spar over Airspace 'intrusion'," *BBC News*, July 24, 2019, accessed September 19, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49091523>.

<sup>4</sup> “Russian and South Korea Spar.”

intelligence-sharing agreement with Tokyo in August 2019.<sup>5</sup>

US policymakers considering competition mechanisms in the South China Sea to facilitate a “free and open” Indo-Pacific region in light of an increasingly bold and confrontational China should leverage USINDOPACOM to lead efforts to maintain a working relationship between these key US allies.<sup>6</sup> Policymakers should leverage USINDOPACOM to maintain the South Korean-Japanese relationship because US strategy and regional security require healthy relationships between these alliance partners. Second, the South Korean-Japanese relationship requires outside intervention to function. Finally, operational-level military engagement offers opportunities to maintain a working relationship between these partners that do not currently exist at the strategic-political level.

## BACKGROUND

The history of South Korean and Japanese mistrust goes back hundreds of years. The last 70 years, however, have been especially problematic due to Japanese conduct during World War II. The resulting tensions continue to simmer and occasionally boil over into social, political, economic, and military realms. During its World War II imperial rule, in addition to other atrocities, Japanese soldiers forced Korean “comfort women” to work in Japanese Army brothels and impressed Koreans into forced labor both in Korea and abroad.<sup>7</sup> Although a 1965 treaty normalized relations between the two nations and delivered \$800 million worth of compensation

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<sup>5</sup> Ji-Young Lee and Mintaro Oba, “Japan-Korea Relations: Unfortunate Circumstances and Escalating Tensions,” *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 106, <http://cc.pacforum.org/2019/01/unfortunate-circumstances-and-escalating-tensions/>.

<sup>6</sup> The Department of Defense, “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region,” June 1, 2019, 3 & 21, accessed August 19, 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/department-of-defense-indo-pacific-strategy-report-2019.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Keith Johnson, “Why Are Japan and South Korea at Each Other's Throats?” *Foreign Policy*, July 15, 2019, accessed September 6, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/15/why-are-japan-and-south-korea-in-a-trade-fight-moon-abe-chips-wwii/>.

in Japanese economic aid and credit, South Korea continues to revisit the wrongs.<sup>8</sup> To make matters worse, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe remains largely unapologetic about the comfort women issue and angers South Koreans by paying homage to the shrines of his Japanese war criminal ancestors.<sup>9</sup> In late 2018, South Korean courts ruled that three Japanese corporations must pay reparations to South Korean forced laborers from World War II.<sup>10</sup> This ruling infuriated Japanese leaders, who responded in July 2019 by applying export controls to restrict South Korea from receiving three chemicals vital to their semiconductor and displays industries.<sup>11</sup> A month later they withdrew preferred trading partner status for South Korea.<sup>12</sup> In response, South Korean Prime Minister Moon tweeted, “We will never again lose to Japan,” and then terminated the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan in August 2019, ending a 2016 agreement that had been years in the making and required immense political capital to ratify.<sup>13</sup> This withdrawal terminated the direct “channel of communication” enabling Tokyo and Seoul to share time-critical intelligence on North Korean troop movements, as well as ballistic missile launches and intelligence on China and Russia.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tim Shorrock, “In a Major Shift, South Korea Defies Its Alliance with Japan,” *The Nation*, August 27, 2019, accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/south-korea-japan-cold-war/>.

<sup>9</sup> Keith Johnson, “Why Are Japan and South Korea at Each Other's Throats?” *Foreign Policy*, July 15, 2019, accessed September 6, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/15/why-are-japan-and-south-korea-in-a-trade-fight-moon-abe-chips-wwii/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ji-Young Lee and Mintaro Oba, “Japan-Korea Relations: Unfortunate Circumstances and Escalating Tensions,” *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 106, <http://cc.pacforum.org/2019/01/unfortunate-circumstances-and-escalating-tensions/>.

<sup>11</sup> Michael R. Gordon, Andrew Jeong, and Alastair Gale, “South Korea Ends Pact to Share Military Information with Japan,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, Jeong, Gale, “Ends Pact.”

<sup>13</sup> Motoko Rich, Edward Wong, and Choe Sang-hun, “As Japan and South Korea Feud Intensifies, U.S. Seems Unwilling, or Unable, to Help,” *The New York Times*, August 04, 2019, accessed August 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/04/world/asia/japan-south-korea-feud.html>; Michael R. Gordon, Andrew Jeong, and Alastair Gale, “South Korea Ends Pact to Share Military Information with Japan,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon, Jeong, and Gale, “South Korea Ends Pact.”

Without US intervention, disputes originating from WWII will continue to haunt the relationship between these two US allies, driving them apart and undermining US regional interests.

### US STRATEGY REQUIREMENTS

The long-term strategic and operational consequences of this widening rift between these two key US allies should motivate US policymakers to leverage USINDOPACOM because the foundation of US security in the region relies upon strong alliances and strong working relationships between US alliance partners. As the United States strategizes ways to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific region, especially in the South China Sea where China's hegemonic aspirations challenge the status quo most sharply, the massive time and space considerations make for a significant challenge with a limited force. Even the world's largest naval force is not sufficient to deter and influence China on its own when required to patrol an area that encompasses half of the earth's surface and sits nearly 6,000 miles from the continental US.<sup>15</sup> This is why both the *National Defense Strategy* and the *INDO-Pacific Strategy Report* explain that our "longstanding alliances and partnerships [are] the bedrock on which our strategy rests."<sup>16</sup> As Walter Russell Mead asserted in his testimony before the US Senate in 2015, "the international security system promoted by the United States is based on two principles, alliance and deterrence....our alliances allow us to do more with less." This is especially important considering the US "does not have the money, military power, or know how, or the will power to

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<sup>15</sup> "About United States Indo-Pacific Command," accessed September 21, 2019, <https://www.pacom.mil/about-usindopacom/>.

<sup>16</sup> The Department of Defense, "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region," June 1, 2019, 3 & 21, accessed August 19, 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/department-of-defense-indo-pacific-strategy-report-2019.pdf>

address every problem.”<sup>17</sup> Admiral Phil Davidson, the 25th commander of USINDOPACOM, concurred. In a speech at the Third Annual China Power Conference, he asserted, “It’s going to take a concerted effort...by the international community to assert those international rights that have been established in the United Nations...and all of us need to come together to assert those rights in the region.”<sup>18</sup> A united stance with allied partners increases regional military potential, presence, and deterrence. It also influences Chinese calculations even when US forces are not physically present.

However, those alliances and partnerships lose their effectiveness as tensions among participating members rise, reducing military effectiveness, deterrence, and offering gaps that China can exploit. In the case of South Korea and Japan, rising tensions have eroded regional security. Seoul’s withdrawal from GSOMIA is a prime example. This agreement, which enabled South Korea and Japan to share intelligence information without having to pass information through the United States, was touted by a US Pentagon official as “key to developing our common defense policy and strategy” in the region.<sup>19</sup> South Korean President Moon withdrew from the agreement due to escalating tensions with Japan. In doing so, he closed a “direct channel” for information sharing in a region where losing fast-moving intelligence, especially on North Korean and Chinese ballistic missile launches, raises risk to the US and its partners.<sup>20</sup> According to retired Army General Vincent Brooks, a former US Forces

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Russell Mead, “Global Challenges and Grand Strategy,” *The American Interest*, August 4, 2017, accessed September 19, 2019, [www.the-american-interest.com/2015/10/22/global-challenges-and-grand-strategy/](http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/10/22/global-challenges-and-grand-strategy/).

<sup>18</sup> Philip S. Davidson, “China’s Power: Up for Debate,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 30, 2018, accessed 17 September 2019, [www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-power-debate](http://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-power-debate).

<sup>19</sup> Tim Shorrock, “In a Major Shift, South Korea Defies Its Alliance with Japan,” *The Nation*, August 27, 2019, accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/south-korea-japan-cold-war/>.

<sup>20</sup> Michael R. Gordon, Andrew Jeong, and Alastair Gale, “South Korea Ends Pact to Share Military Information with Japan,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 2019.



Korea Commander, “The information-sharing structure for Northeast Asia is now fundamentally weaker.”<sup>21</sup> In a similar fashion, South Korean frustration over the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force's World War II-era rising sun flags caused Japan to withdraw from the South Korean Western Pacific Naval Symposium in October 2018.<sup>22</sup> Collectively, these tensions degraded their military relationship, prevented both forces from improving interoperability, and offered China gaps to exploit.

Unfortunately, China understands that US regional strength hinges upon the health of relationships between US allies, and it actively seeks to erode those relationships.<sup>23</sup> For example, it appears China orchestrated the combined flyover of the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands with Russia to exploit tensions between South Korea and Japan. As discussed earlier, the flyover brought existing tensions to the surface, causing Seoul and Tokyo to both claim overflight violations of the same territory. The incident played into China's hand when both nations reacted by casting political barbs at one another.<sup>24</sup> As a Trump Administration Official summarized, this flyover “would not have happened without the eroding alliance structure because of the dispute between Seoul and Tokyo.”<sup>25</sup> China exploited current tensions to chip away at the foundation of the US-Asian alliance system, seeking to drive a wedge between these partners and creating a gap that it can exploit.

China's ability to exploit gaps between our alliance partners extends beyond the military

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<sup>21</sup> Gordon, Jeong, and Gale, "South Korea Ends Pact."

<sup>22</sup> Lee and Oba, "Japan-Korea Relations: Unfortunate Circumstances," 106.

<sup>23</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser, and Oriana Skylar Mastro, "How an Alliance System Withers," *Foreign Affairs*, Foreign Affairs Magazine, September 11, 2019, accessed September 14, 2019, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-09-09/how-alliance-system-withers](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-09-09/how-alliance-system-withers).

<sup>24</sup> Evan Reese, "South Korea, Russia: What to Make of a Midair Interception Over Disputed Waters," *Stratfor*, July 23, 2019, accessed September 19, 2019, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/south-korea-russia-what-make-midair-interception-over-disputed-waters-china-japan-warning-shots>.

<sup>25</sup> Michael R. Gordon, Andrew Jeong, and Alastair Gale, "South Korea Ends Pact to Share Military Information with Japan," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 2019.

realm. As Tokyo escalated a trade war with South Korea by blocking the export of chemicals critical to its semiconductor manufacturing sector, China exploited economic tensions by inviting both states to Beijing in August 2019 to develop a trilateral free trade agreement.<sup>26</sup> While the US sat back and watched, China seized the initiative to draw US allies into its sphere. If Japan continues to withhold chemicals from South Korea, Beijing could offer those critical chemicals to Seoul to replace Japan's imports. Not only will this continue weakening ties between South Korea and Japan, but it would increase South Korea's economic dependence on China. This should cause concern, since China already constitutes 30 percent of South Korea's trade, more than that of the US and Japan combined.<sup>27</sup> This economic dependency represents leverage China holds over South Korea. It enables China to influence and manipulate one of our key allies, undermines US allegiances, and reorients regional relationships toward Beijing.<sup>28</sup>

Since the relationship between these alliance partners is so critical in the US strategy to influence China, US policymakers must search for solutions to maintain their working relationship. To do so, policymakers must seize opportunities to use USINDOPACOM to strengthen military interoperability and highlight the need for military cooperation. For example, ballistic missile defense interoperability recently met setbacks when South Korea terminated GSOMIA. This would be an ideal area to focus on in order to strengthen interoperability and cooperation. Success in military-to-military cooperation, despite political tensions, will ensure

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<sup>26</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser, and Oriana Skylar Mastro, "How an Alliance System Withers," *Foreign Affairs*, Foreign Affairs Magazine, September 11, 2019, accessed September 14, 2019, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-09-09/how-alliance-system-withers](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-09-09/how-alliance-system-withers).

<sup>27</sup> Jaehyon Lee, "South Korea and the South China Sea: A Domestic and International Balancing Act," *Asia Policy* 21, no. 1 (2016): 36-40, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/609173/pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser, and Oriana Skylar Mastro, "How an Alliance System Withers," *Foreign Affairs*, Foreign Affairs Magazine, September 11, 2019, accessed September 14, 2019, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-09-09/how-alliance-system-withers](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-09-09/how-alliance-system-withers).

the military alliance framework remains intact and continues to influence Chinese calculations in the region.

### EXTERNAL INTERVENTION REQUIRED

Secondly, this widening rift between South Korea and Japan should motivate US policymakers to action because South Korea and Japan will not reconcile without outside intervention. Journalist Jonathan Eyal observed in 2013 that “the relationship between two of Asia’s most important countries remains utterly dysfunctional.” He acknowledges that their cooperation has the potential to “transform the security situation in Northern Asia,” but it cannot happen without a serious push from the US.”<sup>29</sup> In the same light, Perry and Yoshihara examine the US-Japanese alliance and conclude, “The United States should serve as the main interlocutor in the capacity of an honest broker between Seoul and Tokyo. This will no doubt require a delicate balancing act.”<sup>30</sup>

These assessments hold up to the scrutiny of modern history. As one looks back over the South Korean-Japanese relationship in the last 100 years, it becomes evident that major progress in their relationship only occurred with outside intervention. The first major milestone in their relationship, the 1965 Normalization Treaty, was “largely the work of the US.”<sup>31</sup> The effort began in 1956 when the Eisenhower administration’s economist, Robert Macy, “urged the administration to intensify the pressure on Seoul” to normalize relations.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately,

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<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Eyal, "The US: Bridge over Troubled Waters," *The Straits Times*, January 26, 2016, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/the-us-bridge-over-troubled-waters>.

<sup>30</sup> Charles M. Perry and Toshi Yoshihara, *The U.S. Japan Alliance: Preparing for Korean Reconciliation and Beyond*, (Everett: Fidelity Press, 2003), 143.

<sup>31</sup> Tim Shorrock, “In a Major Shift, South Korea Defies Its Alliance With Japan,” *The Nation*, August 27, 2019, accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/south-korea-japan-cold-war/>.

<sup>32</sup> Tim Shorrock, “In a Major Shift, South Korea Defies Its Alliance With Japan,” *The Nation*, August 27, 2019, accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/south-korea-japan-cold-war/>.

Kennedy's administration determined that "a settlement between Seoul and Tokyo [was] a top priority" and applied significant political pressure to Seoul and Tokyo.<sup>33</sup> As declassified Central Intelligence Agency documents reveal, President Kennedy's top advisor on Korea pushed "the administration to move forcefully to persuade South Korea and Japan to normalize ties," and argued that "while the initiative should clearly be recognized as American, the action should be handled so as to appear Korean."<sup>34</sup> At the same time, records show that the US pressured Japan, arguing that that normalizing trade relations would not only benefit Japan, but that Japan owed it to South Korea due to World War II exploitation.<sup>35</sup> The treaty, which normalized relations between South Korea and Tokyo for the first time, brought an infusion of cash and trade into South Korea. In fact, by 1973, it resulted in the United States and Japan accounting for "about 70 percent of South Korea's exports, 67 percent of its imports, 90 percent of foreign private investment." Additionally, it laid the foundation for today's regional security structure shared between the US, South Korea, and Japan.<sup>36</sup> South Korea's incredible economic growth resulted in large part from its normalized relationship with Japan, and it would not have happened without significant efforts from several US administrations. This was only the beginning of continued US efforts to keep these two nations working together.

Less than 10 years after the 1965 Normalization Treaty, South Korean and Japanese relations again devolved after a North Korean living in Japan attempted to assassinate South Korean leader Park Chung-hee.<sup>37</sup> This incident raised the level of mistrust between the two

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<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Eyal, "The US: Bridge over Troubled Waters," *The Straits Times*, January 26, 2016, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/the-us-bridge-over-troubled-waters>.

<sup>34</sup> Tim Shorrock, "In a Major Shift, South Korea Defies Its Alliance With Japan," *The Nation*, August 27, 2019, accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/south-korea-japan-cold-war/>.

<sup>35</sup> Shorrock, "In a Major Shift."

<sup>36</sup> Shorrock, "In a Major Shift."

<sup>37</sup> Daniel C. Sneider, Yul Sohn, and Yoshihide Soeya, "U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, Special Report no. 59 (July

countries and required US intervention to mediate the issue.

Again, external pressure proved critical to South Korea and Japan's decision to finally sign the intelligence-sharing agreement in 2016. Without that pressure in 2012, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak withdrew from the agreement due to intense political opposition at home.<sup>38</sup> It took additional pressure from the US, along with a new South Korean administration four years later, to sign the agreement. In the assessment of authors Park and Yun, "the initiative was primarily led by the incumbent Obama administration in the United States." Three years later, as relations between Seoul and Tokyo soured, this time without US intervention, South Korea reversed direction and withdrew from the intel-sharing agreement. History demonstrates the tendency for the South Korean-Japanese relationship to unravel without outside intervention. US policymakers cannot sit idly by waiting for both nations to reconcile; they must take action to draw the two partners together.

### **A REQUIREMENT FOR OPERATIONAL-LEVEL INTERVENTION**

USINDOPACOM, optimally situated at the operational level, offers the best tool for relationship maintenance, since political-level engagement has proven unfruitful in the current environment. Domestic politics in both Korea and Japan prevent cooperation at the political level and tend to drive both countries apart. In Japan, for example, demonstrating contrition over past war crimes can be highly controversial and often triggers backlash.<sup>39</sup> Nationalistic pride,

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2016): 3, accessed October 4, 2019, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/u-s-rok-japan-trilateralism-building-bridges-and-strengthening-cooperation/>.

<sup>38</sup> Jaehan Park and Sangyoung Yun, "Korea and Japan's Military Information Agreement: A Final Touch for the Pivot?" *The Diplomat*, November 26, 2016, accessed September 27, 2019, [thediplomat.com/2016/11/korea-and-japans-military-information-agreement-a-final-touch-for-the-pivot/](http://thediplomat.com/2016/11/korea-and-japans-military-information-agreement-a-final-touch-for-the-pivot/).

<sup>39</sup> Jennifer Lind, *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 183-185.

revisionist history, a desire to avoid admissions of guilt, and political competition all combine to deter Japan's political leaders from making public apologies.<sup>40</sup> Although past Japanese leaders have made apologies, in general, the more South Korean leaders call for Japanese contrition, the more they trigger "counterproductive backlash" that hurts the chances of South Korean-Japanese reconciliation.<sup>41</sup> The counterproductive backlash also explains recent Japanese economic reactions to South Korean legal rulings regarding World War II war crimes. These domestic political pressures also explain and predict continued Japanese leader visits to ancestor shrines for World War II war criminals despite South Korean outcries. Political pressures will continue to push Japan away from South Korea, and until domestic and political tensions diminish, efforts to maintain the South Korean-Japanese relationship must be made below the political level.

Similarly, South Korean domestic politics also makes it unlikely that its relationship with Japan can be improved at the political level. As previously discussed, nationalism, domestic outcries over World War II atrocities, and strong anti-Japanese sentiments as seen in the grass-roots boycotts of Japanese goods continue to drive South Korean politicians to avoid cooperation with Japan. Additionally, a long-standing historical mistrust between South Korean political leaders and their people often leads to strong reactions from the populace when South Korean leaders attempt to make agreements with Japan without popular support. This mistrust stems from a post-Korean-War period of authoritarian government which failed to represent the interests of the people.<sup>42</sup> As a result of this mistrust, even in a democratized Korea, leaders often fail to rally adequate support from the Korean people to enact controversial agreements with the

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<sup>40</sup> Lind, *Sorry States*, 183-185.

<sup>41</sup> Lind, *Sorry States*, 183-185.

<sup>42</sup> Melanie Berry, "Historical Memory And Domestic Civic Trust In Japan-South Korea Security Relations" 2017 (Master's Thesis, Georgetown University, 2017), 21-23, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/1050736>.

Japanese. This tension was a key reason why GSOMIA agreement failed in 2012.<sup>43</sup> These issues, combined with recently escalating tensions with Japan, make it increasingly unlikely that parties will find political solutions in the near future.

As a result, both Asian countries rebuffed even meager attempts made by US diplomats to encourage cooperation. For example, US Secretary of State Pompeo scheduled one-on-one meetings with both foreign ministers in August 2019 to discuss the escalating tensions, but both meetings were canceled. Even though “scheduling” was cited as a cause for the cancellations, New York Times reports, “The Japanese and South Korean foreign ministers were said to be irked by Mr. Pompeo's pressuring them to end their differences.”<sup>44</sup> Ichiro Fujisaki, a former Japanese ambassador to the US, explained, “I don't think it's good for the two countries that we are always asking big brother or big sister to come in and try to improve our relations. The Americans would probably be very angry if we tried to go in and tell them to be a little nicer to Mexico.”<sup>45</sup> Since attempts to assist the South Korean-Japanese relationship at the political level have been rebuffed, and because political pressure pushes these countries apart, any attempts to strengthen their relationship must occur below the political level. By working at the operational level through military engagement, USINDOPACOM offers the best tool for strengthening South Korean-Japanese cooperation and integration without triggering popular or political strife in either country.

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<sup>43</sup> Krista E. Wiegand, "The South Korean–Japanese Security Relationship and the Dokdo/Takeshima Islets Dispute," *The Pacific Review* 28, no. 3 (02, 2015): 347-66. doi:10.1080/09512748.2015.1011209.

<sup>44</sup> Motoko Rich, Edward Wong, and Choe Sang-hun, "As Japan and South Korea Feud Intensifies, U.S. Seems Unwilling, or Unable, to Help," *The New York Times*, August 4, 2019, accessed August 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/04/world/asia/japan-south-korea-feud.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Rich, “Feud Intensifies.”

## ARE OPERATION-LEVEL SOLUTIONS FEASIBLE?

Since current tensions are running so high that political solutions are not currently feasible, some might argue that operational solutions will be impossible as well. That line of reasoning postulates that political tensions directly impact military operations, as demonstrated by Japan's decision to withdraw from the Western Pacific Naval Symposium's fleet review over tensions surrounding their rising sun flag.<sup>46</sup> This certainly is a valid concern, but there are ways to repair relationships and improve interoperability outside the political and domestic tinderbox. The continued US military partnership with the Philippines despite President Duterte's anti-US rhetoric offers possible solutions. After taking office in 2016, Philippine President Duterte threatened to end exercises with the US military, espoused anti-US rhetoric, and courted closer ties with China and Russia.<sup>47</sup> However, despite his promises to cut military and economic ties and his fiery stance against the US, military cooperation not only continued but increased in 2019.<sup>48</sup> It appears this military-to-military cooperation continued due to shared common interests in the South China Sea, the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Agreement, and military-to-military ties forged below the political level.<sup>49</sup> The Philippine example demonstrates the manner in which military-to-military relationships focused on common interests provide ways to endure political storms. Additionally, the US demonstrated the ability to successfully lead trilateral discussions with South-Korean and Japan while avoiding political tensions in the past. Military

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<sup>46</sup> Ji-Young Lee and Mintaro Oba, "Japan-Korea Relations: Unfortunate Circumstances and Escalating Tensions," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 106, <http://cc.pacforum.org/2019/01/unfortunate-circumstances-and-escalating-tensions/>.

<sup>47</sup> Ben Werner, "U.S. And Philippine Militaries Will Increase Security Cooperation in 2019," *USNI News*, October 3, 2018, accessed October 2, 2019, [news.usni.org/2018/10/03/37054](https://www.usni.org/2018/10/03/37054).

<sup>48</sup> Werner, "U.S. And Philippine Militaries."

<sup>49</sup> Esmarquel Paterno II, "Despite New Friends, Philippines Sticks It out with U.S. in 2018," *Rappler*, December 21, 2018, accessed October 2, 2019, [www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/219195-philippines-sticks-it-out-us-military-yearend-2018](http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/219195-philippines-sticks-it-out-us-military-yearend-2018).



leaders orchestrated discussions below the political level to improve areas of shared interest. Specifically, the US held off-the-record discussions on joint logistical operations to prepare for a possible North Korean conflict in 2015 by consulting “under the radar.”<sup>50</sup> In the same way, by addressing shared interests and operating below the political level, USINDOPACOM has the opportunity to maintain and improve South Korean and Japanese military cooperation despite current political tensions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

US policymakers should use USINDOPACOM to draw these two key partners together in order to maintain a working relationship; without involvement, the two partners will continue to push one another away. Solutions must leverage areas of shared interest between the two countries, while also strengthening military interoperability and highlighting the need for military cooperation to sustain a functioning alliance structure that deters China. This requires working to increase preparedness, interoperability, and trust--all strategies championed by the 2019 INDO-PACOM Strategy report.<sup>51</sup>

USINDOPACOM should design and run a trilateral ballistic missile defense exercise with South Korean and Japanese military forces. An exercise of this nature would leverage a Japanese and South Korean shared interest, ballistic missile defense, without fomenting public or political tensions, since both militaries could participate from their own territory using land-

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<sup>50</sup> Daniel C. Sneider, Yul Sohn, and Yoshihide Soeya, “U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation,” *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, Special Report no. 59 (July 2016): 6, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/u-s-rok-japan-trilateralism-building-bridges-and-strengthening-cooperation/>.

<sup>51</sup> The Department of Defense, “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region,” June 1, 2019, 17-44, accessed August 19, 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/departments-of-defense-indo-pacific-strategy-report-2019.pdf>.

based radars, missile batteries, and Aegis Cruisers. An exercise of this nature would require passing missile information through the US since South Korea terminated intel sharing via GSOMIA. The exercise would not only improve interoperability, but it would highlight the intel-sharing challenge faced by all participants. If handled well, after-action reports highlighting this deficiency could open the door for future GSOMIA discussions that could be leveraged at the political level when tensions decrease.

Also, USINDOPACOM should incorporate Japan into a combined US-South Korean exercise that focuses on deterring aggression from regional actors, one of Japan's key security concerns. For example, a large-scale command-post exercise like Ulchi Freedom Guardian falls directly in line with Japan's interest in a peaceful and secure Korean peninsula.<sup>52</sup> This peace and security depend on Japanese logistic support in the rear areas, where forces flowing to the peninsula will need to stage and reconstitute.<sup>53</sup> Exercise planners could involve Japan in a subtle, low-profile manner by incorporating Japanese and US rear-area support functions during these exercises. Japan's inclusion would serve to increase preparedness and interoperability while demonstrating support for South Korea without having to deploy Japanese forces to South Korea. It would also benefit the US as it tests logistics assumptions and capabilities not often exercised.

Lastly, since China and Russia recently demonstrated a willingness to execute a joint overflight of the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands, USINDOPACOM should exercise a simulated ADIZ

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<sup>52</sup> Department of Defense, "Release: Exercise Ulchi Freedom Guardian 2017," August 18, 2017, accessed October 4, 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/1282786/Exercise-ulchi-freedom-guardian-2017/>.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel C. Sneider, Yul Sohn, and Yoshihide Soeya, "U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, Special Report no. 59 (July 2016): 3, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/u-s-rok-japan-trilateralism-building-bridges-and-strengthening-cooperation/>.

penetration in the West Sea (aka the East China Sea) through both countries' ADIZ using a US "target" aircraft. A test of this nature would need to avoid taking place anywhere near the sensitive Dokdo/Takeshima islands to ensure it does not make political tensions worse. This exercise would improve South Korean-Japanese air defense coordination as one nation's interceptors hand off the target aircraft to the other nation's interceptors at ADIZ boundaries. Other than radio coordination, both countries would be able to cooperate without leaving their own airspace, limiting the possibility of inflaming political tensions. An exercise of this nature would improve interoperability, readiness, and trust between the participating nations. It would also demonstrate resolve to nations like China and Russia who may be watching and who, in the future, may again attempt a similar ADIZ violation.

## CONCLUSION

The US-South Korean-Japanese alliance structure established by the US after the Korean War served as the lynchpin for regional security for over fifty years. Although it was originally structured to counter the North Korean threat, the trilateral partnership is more important for the US than ever in light of the emerging great power competition with China, who views both the South and East China Seas as one continuous arena for competition with the US.<sup>54</sup> Considering this escalating competition, US policymakers cannot stand by and watch the alliance structure crumble due to South Korean and Japanese historical tensions, mistrust, and nationalistic tendencies. The alliance structure is too important to US strategy in the region, especially considering limited US regional military capacity due to other global commitments. History shows that South Korean and Japanese cooperation requires US involvement and pressure,

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<sup>54</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, "Asia's Coming Era of Unpredictability," *Foreign Policy*, September 1, 2019, accessed September 18, 2019, [foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/01/asias-coming-era-of-unpredictability/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/01/asias-coming-era-of-unpredictability/).

without which their relationship will devolve. This involvement, however, cannot take place at the national-political level. Currently, this arena is too volatile and reactionary. As leaders from both countries respond to domestic pressure, they escalate the tensions. Instead, leaders must leverage USINDOPACOM to maintain the relationship at the operational-military level where the ability to improve interoperability, leverage shared interests, and build trust can be accomplished “below the radar.” Skillfully managing this challenging task not only offers opportunities to shore up the foundation of our regional alliance structure, but it affords our allies and partners the ability to influence Chinese behavior within the South and East China Seas.

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