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Unlocking the Japan-ROK Relationship: The Key is National Identity

Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder

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Contact us

Dr Andrew Carr
Centre of Gravity series editor
Strategic and Defence Studies Centre
ANU College of Asia and the Pacific
The Australian National University

T 02 6125 1164
E andrew.carr@anu.edu.au
W <http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/sdsc>



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Author bios

Brad Glosserman (brad@pacforum.org) is executive director of Honolulu-based Pacific Forum CSIS. He recently completed a three-year study with Pacific Forum director of programs Carl Baker on the future of U.S. alliances in Asia and is finalizing a study on the impact of the March 11, 2011, “triple catastrophe” on Japan. Mr. Glosserman is the editor, with Tae-hyo Kim, of *The Future of U.S.-Korea-Japan Relations: Balancing Values and Interests* (CSIS, 2004). His opinion pieces and commentary regularly appear in media around the globe, and he has written dozens of monographs on U.S. foreign policy and Asian security relations.



Scott Snyder (ssnyder@cfcr.org) is senior fellow for Korea studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Snyder’s program examines South Korea’s efforts to contribute on the international stage; its potential influence and contributions as a middle power in East Asia; and the peninsular, regional, and global implications of North Korean instability. Snyder is the co-editor of *North Korea in Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society* (Rowman and Littlefield, October 2012), and the editor of *Global Korea: South Korea’s Contributions to International Security* (Council on Foreign Relations, October 2012) and *The U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Meeting New Security Challenges* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, March 2012).

Note:

This essay is drawn from *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States* by Brad Glosserman and Scott A. Snyder. It will be published May 26 by Columbia University Press. Further details on back page.

Unlocking the Japan-ROK Relationship: The Key is National Identity

Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder

Executive Summary

- ✦ The Japan-ROK relationship seems at near rock-bottom. The presents fundamental challenges to the US rebalance strategy and threatens to undermine the security and stability US allies rely on.
- ✦ Recognising the national identity clashes between these countries should be directly acknowledged and addressed.
- ✦ There is scope for both short-term practical improvements as well as a ‘grand bargain’ if national identity concerns are considered as well as strategic issues.
- ✦ Australia can play a vital role in encouraging this change.

Policy Recommendation

- ✦ Australia should press Japan and South Korea to overcome their differences and work more closely with them in bilateral and multilateral forums. It can help provide political cover for early engagement and support cooperation to preserve the existing regional order.

There are few absolutes in foreign policy, but we can anticipate two things with almost 100 percent certainty: increasing complexity, diversity of threats and challenges, and increasingly constrained national budgets to address them. It’s a dangerous combination, one that not only raises basic questions about national security, but one that also obliges us to reassess the basic architecture of international order, along with its associated norms and institutions.¹

For the administration of US President Barack Obama, these questions are integral to its ‘rebalance to Asia,’ a poorly understood and thus much derided foreign and national security policy. The ‘rebalance’ is an outgrowth of the 2010 *National Security Strategy* of the United States, an attempt to articulate a foreign policy framework as the US winds down involvement in two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, rebuild an economy drained by a decade of conflict, and restructure US engagement with Asia. Ultimately, national rejuvenation, achieved by yoking a flagging US economy to the extraordinary dynamism of Asia, and renewed American leadership in this region and globally are the twin goals of the policy. (In fact, the two are closely linked.) Critically, the rebalance is a signal to US allies, partners and adversaries of the country’s deep and enduring commitment to the region.

The cornerstone of this policy is the consolidation of relations with US allies and partners. This requires the modernisation of US alliances along with a ‘thickening’ of the fabric of relations among those countries. That means not only the bolstering of new bilateral ties between Washington and its partners, through new institutional links such as the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS), but expanding those bilateral contacts to form multilateral structures, such as the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) that includes Washington, Canberra and Tokyo.

Ultimately national rejuvenation and renewed American leadership are the twin goals of the rebalance policy.



In theory, this process should be simple, especially for the United States, Japan and South Korea. All three countries are liberal democracies, governed by the rule of law and animated by a profound respect for human dignity and the rights of the individual. They all have vibrant economies, and are committed to capitalism and an open global trading system. All three are post-industrial societies, and Japan and South Korea have trod similar paths to development. Tokyo and Seoul are both allied to Washington and thus share a bureaucratic orientation and outlook when framing security issues. Their individual alliances with the US should impose a degree of uniformity and even interoperability when assessing and responding to security concerns. Finally, there is the shared geographical positioning of Japan and South Korea. The two countries are virtual neighbors: when coupled with their political and ideological similarities, this should push the two countries toward convergent perceptions of the regional

security environment. Both see North Korea as a threat and while the Japanese are more open in their hostility toward China, South Koreans are increasingly worried about China and its behavior.

In the past, this logic worked. Washington, Tokyo and Seoul shared positions on most regional security threats and cooperated to achieve shared objectives, arguably generating momentum toward an improved bilateral relationship between the two neighbors. The most notable example of this convergence was in the handling of the North Korean nuclear threat during the 1990s. South Korea and Japan joined the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) and the two governments with Washington forged a unified policy toward Pyongyang through the Trilateral Cooperation and Oversight Group (TCOG). At the same time, Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo and President Kim Dae Jung established a Joint Partnership agreement in 1998 that addressed historical issues forthrightly and promised a 'future-oriented relationship.' Since the collapse of TCOG in the early 2000s, however, trilateral cooperation among the US, Japan and South Korea has been most notable by its absence.

The rising frictions that have characterised and often dominated the Japan-ROK relationship during the last decade reflect national identity concerns.

In practice, however, robust trilateralism is a distant dream, undermined by increasingly contentious relations between Seoul and Tokyo. The rising frictions that have characterised and often dominated the Japan-ROK relationship during the last decade reflect national identity concerns, an under-appreciated dimension of international relations that is assuming ever-more influence in the post-Cold War world. An accurate understanding of conceptions of national identity in Japan and South Korea is critical to grasping the problems that bedevil their bilateral relationship. This is a vital issue for Washington as well since tensions between Japan and South Korea also inhibit trilateral cooperation with the US. Given the security challenges in Northeast Asia, in particular the various threats posed by North Korea, the potential contributions that both Japan and South Korea can make in a regional contingency, the degree to which cooperation is actually assumed in planning, and the growing fiscal difficulties that each country faces, a failure to maximise trilateral cooperation poses real risks to the security of the three countries.

Our research into national identity in each country paints a troubling picture. South Korea and Japan are on diverging national trajectories. Korea is a growing, confident country that seeks broader engagement on its terms. It is the world's

14th largest economy, possessor of an extraordinary export machine and home of the Hallyu wave that has captivated the region and the world. Nevertheless, there remains a sense among Koreans that theirs is a small nation subject to forces beyond its control, the proverbial 'shrimp among whales'. This insecurity is a troubling legacy that heightens Korean sensitivities to status issues and slights. Moreover, as a country that has recovered its nationhood following decades of Japanese colonial rule in the first part of the 20th century, Korean wariness of Japan seems hardwired into the national psyche.

Meanwhile, Japan struggles to overcome political and economic stagnation and a profound sense that the country has lost its way. A country that has long envisioned itself as the leader of Asia, it now fears that it has been eclipsed by China, a nation with which it also has a fraught history. At the same time Japan also sees itself as a victim – either of the imperial regime or, for a small group of conservative nationalists, victor’s justice at the end of World War II.

These notions of national identity provide the bedrock for foreign policy and international relations. Sadly, they yield considerable suspicion that is easily turned to animosity. Resting atop this foundation are longstanding disputes over history and territory, tinder too frequently ignited by inflammatory statements by officials and politicians, textbook controversies, or calculated attempts in both countries to appeal to nationalist and populist sentiment. ROK analyst Bong Youngshik has characterised the bilateral relationship as one of ‘mutual abandonment’, in which both countries ‘have different strategic calculations,’ ‘political parties and civil society on each side [have] lost interest in taking initiatives to improve bilateral ties,’ and ‘political cooperation is not a top priority.’¹²

Public opinion polls confirm that assessment. In the 2014 Genron NPO poll of opinion in the two countries, 70 percent of Koreans had an unfavorable opinion of Japan (a decrease from 76 percent in the previous year’s poll), while 54 percent of Japanese had an unfavorable opinion of South Koreans, an increase from 37 percent in 2013.³ Fortunately – if that is the word – the relationship may have hit bottom. Nearly 70 percent of Koreans believe this situation ‘is undesirable and have concerns,’ or ‘is a problem and needs to be resolved’; just over 61 percent of Japanese felt the same way.⁴ Polls by the Asan Institute show substantial support among South Koreans for improved relations with Japan.⁵

Even though a growing portion of the public in both countries acknowledges the need – and desire – for better relations, a ‘fatigue’ with each other on both sides is settling in to public perceptions, and the political leadership in Tokyo and Seoul has been slow to respond. That reluctance has been mitigated to some extent by efforts to maintain cooperation and coordination at the lower, working levels of the foreign and security policy bureaucracies, but that work is necessarily limited by the lack of enthusiasm from superiors as well as a desire to keep heads below the parapet to avoid being targeted if another incident creates a search for scapegoats to ‘punish’ the other country.

Despite deteriorating relations between Japan and South Korea, the United States is attempting to sustain trilateralism. Washington has engineered a number of meetings between the leadership of the three countries: Presidents Obama and Park sat down with Prime Minister Abe at the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague in March 2014, foreign ministers met in Washington in April 2015, and Defense ministers convened at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2013 and 2014 as well. These meetings, along with mid-level discussions, reflect the importance the US attaches to trilateralism with alliance partners, a priority explicitly identified in the *National Security Strategy*, the US State Department’s 2010 *Quadrilateral Diplomacy and Development Review*, as well as every speech and statement on the rebalance and US policy toward the region.

US thinking is driven by the new security threats and the new fiscal realities identified at the beginning of this analysis. Increased cooperation with allies is more efficient, results in a more effective use of resources, consolidates ties among partners, and builds the confidence and capabilities needed to respond to crises. It also rewrites the regional narrative, shifting perceptions of actors and their roles. Moreover, it is a telling early test of US power if it cannot find a way to stabilise fraught relations among its closest allies. A focus on alliances helps remind observers that the balance of power is not determined by the United States and China alone; the United States has a network of security partners and relationships that must also be taken into account.



All three have and will continue to display sensitivity to Chinese concerns, but that does not mean they should give China a veto.

US allies enjoy these benefits too, and other advantages as well. These ties ensure that the United States remains engaged in the region, reducing fears of US abandonment or withdrawal. Allies get privileged access to intelligence and technology. Heightened cooperation gives allies more insight into and impact on US decision making. Similarly, and little appreciated, is the insight that each ally gains into the workings of the other ally's relations with Washington. Complaints about the opacity of each alliance are a regular feature of track 1.5 trilateral dialogues held by Pacific Forum CSIS.⁶ Finally, for Japan, stronger ties with the US and its allies reduce suspicions of its intentions and facilitate Tokyo's integration into regional security planning.

Taking a still broader perspective, deepening trilateral cooperation and regionalisation of alliances provides a benchmark for the expansion of security cooperation among like-minded governments beyond the three countries. It sets standards that can be used to deepen and broaden security cooperation in East Asia.

The biggest obstacle to expanded trilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia – apart from the practical question about feasibility, given bilateral tensions between Seoul and Tokyo – is China. Chinese officials and experts see enhanced trilateral security cooperation – any enhanced cooperation between the US and its allies – as ultimately aimed at Beijing and an attempt to constrain its behavior and contain its influence. At every opportunity, US alliances are dismissed as Cold War relics that should be abandoned. These denunciations are not just rhetoric: many Chinese sincerely believe those charges. But at every opportunity, Washington, like Seoul and Tokyo, reiterates its desire for positive, mutually advantageous constructive relations with Beijing. All three have close economic ties with China and have even begun to engage on security concerns. All three have and will continue to display sensitivity to Chinese concerns, but that does not mean they should give China a veto over policies that they conclude are in their national interests.



A 'fatigue' with each other on both sides is settling in to public perceptions, and the political leadership in Tokyo and Seoul has been slow to respond.

To strengthen trilateralism among the US, Japan and South Korea, we recommend two courses of action. The first is a lowest common denominator approach that, nevertheless, is bold by current standards. The second is a 'Grand Bargain' among the three countries that is extremely ambitious and requires courage by each leader.

The first strategy embraces a two-pronged approach that uses both top-down and bottom-up methods to strengthen existing cooperation. It begins with a leader-level trilateral statement that calls for trilateral cooperation to promote regional and global security. It will frame trilateral cooperation in ways that benefit all three countries and indicate that it is being done as part of each country's international responsibilities. This statement will signal publics and bureaucracies of top-level support for increased trilateralism. Those leaders would reinforce that message by meeting regularly, both as stand-alone events and on the sidelines of gatherings such as the UN General Assembly, the G20, or the East Asian Summit. Such meetings need to become routine. A trilateral foreign and defense ministers meeting, a '2+2+2,' should also be implemented.

Meanwhile, foreign and security policy bureaucrats at the working level should be convening to align thinking and coordinate efforts. We envision a trilateral extended deterrence dialogue that explores how to deter and reassure, as well as meetings among the three policy-planning staffs. This should serve as part of a whole of government approach by each country to identify shared concerns and push relevant bureaucratic constituencies together. Those discussions should be extensive, involving a wide range of institutional interests and addressing a broad agenda. Preliminary topics could include alliance interests, security cooperation, nontraditional security threats, trade and economic concerns, financial stabilisation, North Korea, and China.⁷

The three militaries could build on the annual Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT) held since 2008. They should expand the placement of observers from the other ally on bilateral exercises, and continue the trilateral naval exercises that focused on interoperability and preparation for contingencies. Another option is cooperation among a larger group of US allies, perhaps in a quadrilateral format that includes Australia, to provide cover for the more politically sensitive coordination between Seoul and Tokyo.

The second option is the 'Great Bargain' or 'Grand Reset.' This is an ambitious but possibly essential series of moves by each government that draws on our conclusions that the main obstacles to better Japan-South Korea relations are identity-based and aims to reconstitute the historical, psychological, and emotional context in which Japan, South Korea, and the United States interact. The agreements would be detailed and carefully orchestrated, and the particulars should be left to the three governments, but a reset would rest on three pillars.

(1) The US would acknowledge its deep involvement in the historical events at the end of World War II that provide the main context for identity-related wounds between Japan and South Korea. A first step would consist of a US acknowledgment of the suffering of Japanese civilians that accompanied the atomic bombings of Japan. Washington would also address its failure to tie up the loose ends surrounding the postwar settlement, especially concerning disputed sovereignty and conflicting maritime claims. These steps would be undertaken so as to induce Japanese and South Korean responses to effectively address historical grievances and establish a new framework for a stable and productive Japan-ROK relationship.

(2) Japan would acknowledge state responsibility for the crimes and injustices perpetrated by the imperial government, military, and soldiers during the occupation of Korea. To reassure Koreans that renewed military aggression is impossible, Japan would make a powerful symbolic gesture by giving up its claim to the Dokdo/Takeshima islands (revealed in Korean public opinion polls to be a central obstacle to better relations on the Korean side) and make financial payments from the Government of Japan to individual Koreans who suffered as sex slaves under Japanese colonial rule; Japanese prime ministers would promote a zero-tolerance policy among Cabinet members and top party officials regarding historical revisionism.

(3) For its part, Korea would explicitly accept the Japanese offer, acknowledge Japan's efforts as a final gesture to settle historical issues and commence a forward-looking relationship with Japan.

We propose a new Japan-ROK Treaty of Friendship and Partnership, which would contain several key provisions that would help transform perceptions of each country and blunt the sharp edges of identity that drive the two nations into conflict. First, it would contain a 'no-war clause' that would declare that the two countries would never use force to settle any dispute between them. Second, the treaty would declare Japanese support for the unification of the Korean Peninsula under Seoul, a statement that would address Korean concerns about Japan's long-term intentions about the fate of the peninsula. Third, it would outline the shared values and interests that unite the two countries and declare them a basis for cooperative action by the two governments. Fourth, it would explicitly recognise and back Japan's constructive regional security role in East Asia. Fifth, it would establish a day for joint commemoration by the two countries of the history of the twentieth century, a day that would counter existing holidays that mark remembrance of historical grievances and signal the meshing of the two countries' future relations.

The main obstacles to better Japan-South Korea relations are identity based.





This approach is bold and potentially controversial. But we argue that it is also necessary. It would unshackle the potential for closer South Korea–Japan relations. It would surmount the historical and territorial issues that have constrained relations between the two countries. It would put history in the past and open the door to a true future-oriented relationship that has stood in the way of better South Korea–Japan relations for so long.

While this proposal serves the strategic interests of the three countries, the most important dimension of the grand bargain may be its moral aspect. Governments have to be seen taking responsibility for the past – and in the ROK’s case for the future. But as long as the Japan–South Korea relationship and its attendant problems are addressed in the form of politics as usual, ordinary citizens will not see it as a concern of theirs and will not engage. Moral decisions

are for each citizen to make; framing the relationship on this level gives them—ordinary Koreans and Japanese—a stake in the future of the relationship and a role to play in setting its course.

The chances of success in this effort can be increased because the ‘great reset’ approach acknowledges that identity issues rather than simply strategic concerns are at the core of the relationship. Bold gestures will be ‘a shock to the system,’ forcing each country to reassess its image of the other and to reconfigure the preconceived identity it has of its partner and, at the same time, itself. A great reset appeals to the Japanese sense of themselves as a ‘peace-loving’ nation and people. It offers them the opportunity to seize the moral high ground and use that as a platform for a larger international profile. In each dimension, Japan is compensating for the larger forces diminishing its international presence. It is a counter to its shrinking national confidence.

A similar logic works for South Korea. Moving forward with Japan should appeal to Korea’s new sense of confidence and its readiness to step up its international engagement. It builds a forward-looking relationship with its closest regional partner, while reinforcing its security alliance with the US by enabling strengthened cooperation and coordination based on shared values, concerns, national interests. Reinvigorated trilateralism among the United States, Japan and South Korea has the potential to transform the strategic dynamic in Northeast Asia, and beyond. Accomplishing that objective demands new thinking, not only about ‘the other’ but in how we frame foreign policy discussions, acknowledging the powerful role national identity concerns can play, and using them to advance our national interests.

The Grand Bargain is bold and potentially controversial, but also necessary. It would unshackle the potential for closer South Korea–Japan relations.

That idea — make better use of national identity in foreign policy making — is one of the obvious recommendations we have for Australia. Despite being amorphous and squishy, national identity should not be derided and dismissed. It can be a powerful predictor of foreign policy outcomes. Perhaps more importantly, it provides the deeper understanding necessary to effectively engage other countries to avoid misunderstanding and establish mutually satisfactory outcomes.

Second, while trilateralism is an important framework for responses to national security issues in Northeast Asia, Canberra (along with Washington, Tokyo and Seoul) should consider quadrilateral engagement as well. The four countries have similar interests and values and their foreign policy bureaucracies easily align, making coordination easier. A quadrilateral format can help surmount obstacles that separate Japan and South Korea. Crudely put, adding Australia to the mix provides cover for South Koreans who want to engage but are stymied by tensions with Japan.

Third, Australia should continue its efforts to align relations with Seoul and Tokyo. Prime Minister Abbott's visits to Japan and South Korea last year made plain the alignment and convergence of interests among the three countries. The issues addressed were the same; the interests and objectives the same; the outcomes the same.

Fourth, at a minimum Australia should press Japan and South Korea to overcome their differences and work more closely bilaterally and with third (and fourth) countries. Australian thinking is highly valued in each capital; Australia may even have more credibility than the US in this effort as American efforts are sometimes seen as self-interested and heavy handed. Australian diplomats and officials should be pushing their Japanese and South Korean counterparts to find common cause and engage with each other.

Finally, Australia should press more for multilateral (or minilateral) engagement to preserve the existing regional order, along with associated rules and norms as an international public good. That case can and should be made in the abstract — in other words, without reference to China. Cooperation and coordination among US allies makes sense and should be pursued, regardless of what China is or does. When Australia makes that case, in those terms, it reinforces the message that is currently sent by Washington, Seoul and Tokyo. That chorus should be louder and the message consistent, both to deflate Chinese objections and to rally other governments to that position.



Australia may even have more credibility than the US in this effort.

Policy Recommendation

- ✦ Australia should press Japan and South Korea to overcome their differences and work more closely with them in bilateral and multilateral forums. It can help provide political cover for early engagement and support cooperation to preserve the existing regional order.

Endnotes

- 1 This is, at its heart, the source of Hugh White's analysis in *The China Choice*, and his subsequent writing.
- 2 Bong Youngshik, 'ROK and US Views on the Foreign Policy of the Abe Administration,' *Asan Forum*, November 6, 2013.
- 3 The Genron NPO, 'The 2nd Joint Japan-South Korea Public Opinion Poll: Analysis Report on Comparative Data,' July 16, 2014, at <http://www.genron-npo.net/en/pp/archives/5142.html>
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 See for example, Asan poll, *South Korea and their Neighbors 2014*, at <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/south-koreans-and-their-neighbors-2014/>
- 6 Brad Glosserman, 'Respond and Restrain: Deterrence and Reassurance in Northeast Asia,' *Pacific Forum CSIS Issues & Insights*, Vol. 14, No. 16, Dec. 4, 2014.
- 7 Some of these discussions are reportedly underway in the trilateral steering group.

The Japan–South Korea Identity Clash

East Asian Security and the United States

Brad Glosserman & Scott A. Snyder

“A thoughtful and enlightening read.”

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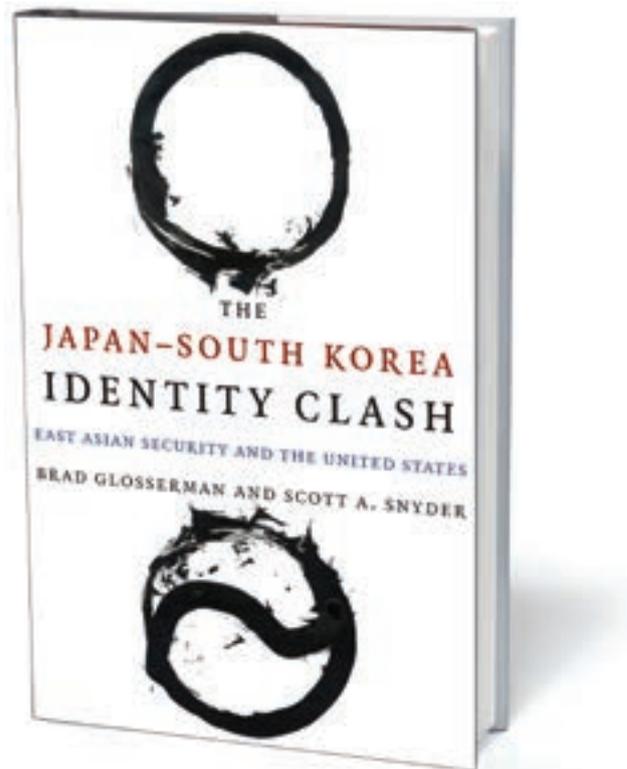
Japan and South Korea are Western-style democracies with open-market economies committed to the rule of law. They are also US allies. However, despite their shared interests, shared values, and geographic proximity, divergent national identities have driven a wedge between them. Drawing on decades of expertise, Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder investigate the roots of this split and its ongoing threat to the region and the world.

Glosserman and Snyder isolate competing notions of national identity as the main obstacle to a productive partnership between Japan and South Korea. Through public opinion data, interviews, and years of observation, they show how fundamentally incompatible, rapidly changing conceptions of national identity in Japan and South Korea—and not struggles over power or structural issues—have complicated territorial claims and international policy. Despite changes in the governments of both countries and concerted efforts by leading political figures to encourage US-ROK-Japan security cooperation, the Japan-Korea relationship continues to be hobbled by history and its deep imprint on ideas of national identity. This book recommends bold, policy-oriented prescriptions for overcoming problems in Japan-Korea relations and facilitating trilateral cooperation among these three Northeast Asian allies, recognizing the power of the public on issues of foreign policy, international relations, and the prospects for peace in Asia.

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BRAD GLOSSERMAN is the executive director of Pacific Forum CSIS. Previously, he served on the editorial board of *The Japan Times*. His writing, commentary, and analysis on U.S. foreign policy and developments in Asia appear in publications around the world.

SCOTT A. SNYDER is senior fellow for Korea studies and director of the Program on US-Korea Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations. He writes regularly on issues in US-Korea relations and Northeast Asian politics and security for CFR's *Asia Unbound* blog and for *Forbes.com*.



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