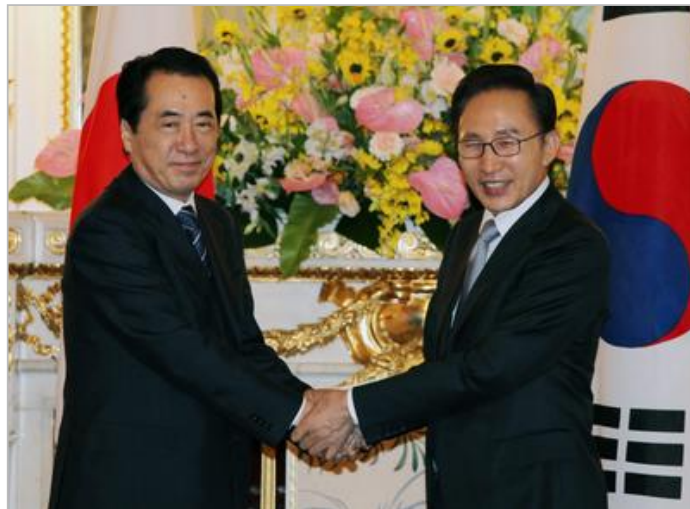
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A Korea-Japan alliance?

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Korea-Japan relations have warmed considerably since President Lee Myung-bak took office, but new agreements have proven elusive.



After raising the idea with hundreds of Japanese, ranging from Diet members to Okinawa pineapple farmers, I have concluded that there is no time to waste for President Lee and Prime Minister Kan Naoto to pursue a formal alliance.

Overcoming centuries of animosity has proven difficult. Indeed, the shadow of history often looms over the present. Korea's disaster team was the first foreign group to search for survivors from Japan's devastating earthquake, but less than three weeks later, Tokyo's release of textbooks, which insist Dok-do (a cluster of small rocky islands claimed by Japan under the name Takeshima) belongs to

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Japan, threw cold water on the Korean people's outpouring of emotional and financial support for Japan.

How can we resolve differing interpretations of history? The simple answer is we cannot. This year marks the 150th anniversary of the outbreak of the American Civil War, yet many white Southerners still refer to the 'War of Northern Aggression' and proudly fly a flag most Americans consider a symbol of racism and rebellion. The important thing is that these Southerners do not reflect the views of the vast majority of Americans.

While Tokyo continues to claim Dok-do, the average Japanese just doesn't care. Most Japanese would not be able to find the island on a map. Indeed, I could not find a single public sign in Tokyo or any other of the seven major cities I have visited concerning 'Takeshima'. The Okinawa Visitor's Bureau informed me that it is impossible for Japanese civilians to visit the Senkaku Islands and expressed surprise when I told them Koreans could freely visit Dok-do. The Japanese who really care about Dok-do are much more of a minority and even more powerless than those who yearn for the Confederacy. Unlike Koreans, few Japanese are willing to die for these rocks.

I told my Japanese audiences that if Tokyo renounced its hopeless claim, there would be a flood of Korean goodwill. Yet, many Japanese believe this would undermine Tokyo's claim to the Northern Territories (even though Moscow shows no intention of even discussing what it calls the Kurile Islands). Keio University's Soeya Yoshihide argues that the real issue is Japan's domestic politics: the right-wingers must be placated. Japanese are crazy about Korean food, dramas and Girls' Generation, not Dok-do! Given Korea's military control of Dok-do, Tokyo's claim should be ignored.

If mistrust should no longer be an obstacle to closer ties with Japan, then there are three good reasons for forming an alliance rather than pursuing the ad hoc military cooperation we have seen to date. For starters, China and North Korea have become increasingly belligerent. [North Korea attacked the South twice last year](#) and [China has repeatedly sent ships into waters controlled by Japan or Korea](#). Kim Jong-il's unprecedented third visit to China in the past year reminds us that the two countries are locked in an ever-tightening embrace. Sadly, the Cold War is alive and well in Northeast Asia.

The second reason Korea and Japan should pursue an alliance is a preoccupied and faltering United States. Thanks to George W. Bush, the US government is broke and militarily over-extended. President Obama inherited two botched wars that have cost the lives of over 6,000 US soldiers and several trillion dollars. Washington will have little choice but to demand ever-increasing contributions to the basing of an ever-decreasing number of US troops in Korea and Japan. Clinging to an increasingly tattered American skirt in the face of a rising and more threatening China will not ensure the defence of Korea or Japan.

Moreover, even though Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with her Korean and Japanese counterparts last fall in Washington, the Obama Administration has

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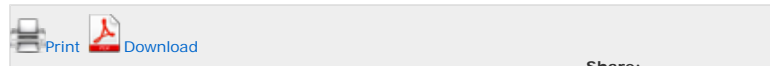
shown no interest in creating a formal structure that would institutionalize trilateral cooperation. The Clinton Administration initiated the Trilateral Cooperation and Oversight Group, but it was allowed to wither and die under President Bush. Korea and Japan will have to take matters into their own hands.

Fortunately, Seoul and Tokyo have the right leaders needed to make this happen. It may be difficult to see from Seoul, but since taking power from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) two years ago, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has adopted a more friendly approach towards Korea. Prime Minister Kan not only apologised to Korea upon taking office, he also pledged to return the 1,205 Chosun Dynasty texts stolen during the Japanese occupation. The LDP tried to block their return, but failed. Both of the DPJ's first two prime ministers pledged not to visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine.

The initiative to form an alliance will most likely have to come from Seoul, given that Tokyo is preoccupied with recovering from the earthquake and halting the Fukushima nuclear meltdowns. In addition, Prime Minister Kan is fighting for his political life due to the LDP's intransigence and an insurrection within his own party. Nevertheless, the DPJ should be in power for at least another year.

President Lee rightly focused on Japan's recovery from the earthquake during his visit to Japan last week with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. But if he follows through with plans for an official visit later this year, he should not miss this window of opportunity. The proposals made by the Korean and [Japanese defense](#) ministers in January to improve intelligence sharing and logistical support provide a good place to start. It is high time America's best friends in Asia became better friends with each other.

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