

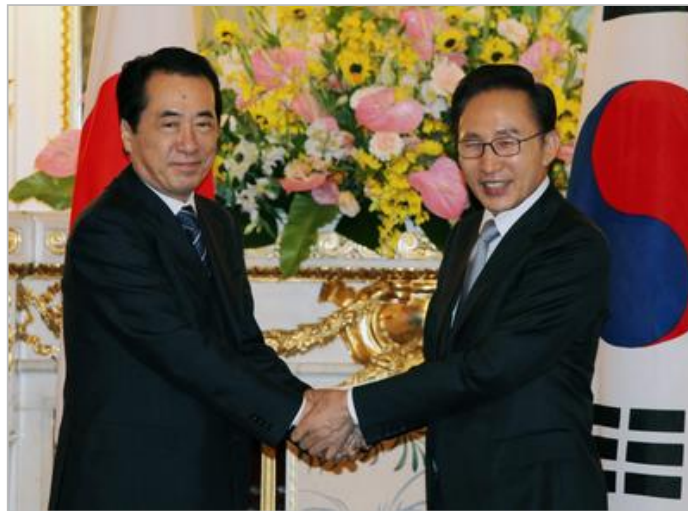
[Home](#) | 
 [About](#) | 
 [Contributors](#) | 
 [Quarterly](#) | 
 [Emerging Scholars](#) | 
 [G20 Asia Forum](#) | 
 [EABER](#)

## A Korea-Japan alliance?

June 9th, 2011

Author: Peter M. Beck, CFR, Keio University

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

Search

Subscribe

[weekly digest](#)    [each post](#)

[more info](#)

Editors & Contributors

Editors

[Shiro Armstrong](#)  
[Peter Drysdale](#)

Contributors

[Kent Anderson](#)  
[Geoffrey Barker](#)  
[Aaron Batten](#)  
[Suman Bery](#)  
[Satish Chand](#)  
[Bruce Chapman](#)  
[Philippa Dee](#)  
[Andrew Elek](#)  
[Nicholas Farrelly](#)  
[Christopher Findlay](#)  
[Yoichi Funabashi](#)  
[Ross Garnaut](#)  
[Aurelia George Mulgan](#)  
[Jane Golley](#)  
[Stephen Grenville](#)  
[Tobias Harris](#)  
[Gary Hawke](#)  
[Stephen Howes](#)  
[Yiping Huang](#)  
[Kazumasa Iwata](#)  
[Raghendra Jha](#)  
[Frank Jotzo](#)  
[Rajiv Kumar](#)  
[Suiwah Leung](#)  
[Andrew Macintyre](#)

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

Ryan Manuel  
Peter McCawley  
Ross McLeod  
Dominic Meagher  
Chung - In Moon  
Luke Nottage  
Jonas Pareillo - Plesner  
Joel Rathus  
Benjamin Reilly  
Richard Rigby  
Amin Saikal  
Hadi Soesastro  
Vo Tri Thanh  
Michael Wesley  
Hugh White  
Yongsheng Zhang

ANU Graduate Students  
ANU Indonesia Project  
CSIS Indonesia  
ICRIER  
MIER  
New Mandala  
Pacific Policy Project  
PIDS  
Guest Authors

[View all contributors here](#)

#### Topics

[2008 in review and the year ahead](#)  
[2009 in review and the year ahead](#)  
[2010 in review and the year ahead](#)  
[ASEAN](#)  
[Asia & the global financial crisis](#)  
[Asian regional architecture](#)  
[Asian security](#)  
[China - Japan relations](#)  
[Chinese outward FDI](#)  
[Chinese political transition](#)  
[Chinese RMB](#)  
[Climate change](#)  
[Foreign aid](#)  
[G20 and Asia](#)  
[G20 and trade reform](#)  
[Japanese politics](#)  
[North Korea](#)  
[Trans - Pacific Partnership](#)  
[United States and Asia](#)  
[US - Japan alliance](#)  
[Weekly editorial](#)  
[WTO](#)

#### Countries / Economies

[Australia](#)  
[Burma/Myanmar](#)  
[China](#)  
[Fiji](#)  
[India](#)  
[Indonesia](#)  
[Japan](#)  
[Malaysia](#)  
[New Zealand](#)  
[North Korea](#)  
[Pakistan](#)  
[Philippines](#)  
[PNG](#)  
[Singapore](#)  
[South Korea](#)

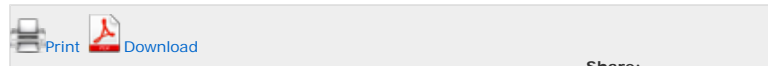
shown no interest in creating a formal structure that would institutionalize trilateral cooperation. The Clinton Administration initiated the Trilateral Cooperation and Oversight Group, but it was allowed to wither and die under President Bush. Korea and Japan will have to take matters into their own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

*Peter Beck is a Council on Foreign Relations-Hitachi Research Fellow at Keio University, Tokyo.*



Share:

View more posts by [Peter Beck](#)

#### Related Articles:

1. [US-Japan alliance faces a brave new world](#)
2. [North Korea: Why is Seoul and Tokyo Cooperation Necessary?](#)
3. [Managing the Japan-US alliance](#)
4. [The Lee-Obama summit: alliance for peace and unification](#)

#### What other people are reading:

1. [Only G20 has the numbers that count](#)
2. [Australia also should "Rail at Australian's Tabloid Trash" about Japan](#)
3. [Sanctions against North Korea](#)

This entry was posted on Thursday, June 9th, 2011 at 10:00 am and is filed under [International](#)

[Taiwan](#)  
[Thailand](#)  
[United States](#)  
[Vietnam](#)

#### Quarterly

The Quarterly magazine from the East Asia Forum.

[Regulatory reawakening](#)  
 Vol 3, Issue 1  
 January - March 2011

[Asia and the G20](#)  
 Vol 2, Issue 4  
 October - December 2010

[Next generation on Asia](#)  
 Vol 2, Issue 3  
 July - September 2010

[Questions for Southeast Asia](#)  
 Vol 2, Issue 2  
 April - June 2010

[The challenge of China](#)  
 Vol 2, Issue 1  
 January - March 2010

[Copenhagen and beyond](#)  
 Vol 1, Issue 3  
 October - December 2009

[Asia Pacific Community](#)  
 Vol 1, Issue 2  
 July - September 2009

[Managing the crisis](#)  
 Vol 1, Issue 1  
 April - June 2009

For electronic copies of back issues, links to the individual articles and to subscribe to the hard copies, [see the EAFQ page](#).

#### Blogroll

- [All Roads Lead to China](#)
- [ANU Indonesia Project](#)
- [Asia Foundation](#)
- [Asian Security Initiative](#)
- [China Digital Times](#)
- [East Asia & Pacific on the Rise](#)
- [ECIPE](#)
- [Foreign Policy](#)
- [Lowy Interpreter](#)
- [New Mandala](#)
- [Observing Japan](#)
- [Real Time Economic Issues](#)
- [South Asia Masala](#)
- [VoxEU](#)

#### Links

- [College of Asia Pacific, ANU](#)
- [Crawford School, ANU](#)
- [EABER](#)
- [East Asia Insights at JCIE](#)
- [GIARI, Waseda University](#)