

Research Paper

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Governance, Leadership and Legitimacy in East Asia



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Summary

- There are growing challenges to the assumption that the optimal method of government is representative parliamentary democracy. Questions of governance, legitimacy and leadership are therefore increasingly relevant. The political chaos in the UK since the Brexit referendum shows how democratic principles can buckle under the strain if these questions are unresolved.
- In East Asia, such issues are reflected in rivalry between nations as well as through competition for influence between different actors within specific countries. Japan, South Korea and China have different political traditions and post-war experiences, and this has led to conflicting political models.
- Japan's transition to representative democracy came in the aftermath of the Second World War: the effectiveness of its government's leadership is seen as depending more on its economic management than plans for constitutional 'reform'. Korea's democratic transition is more recent, and after decades of strong economic growth, younger voters are moving towards more value-driven politics. China remains an authoritarian country, whose leadership derives legitimacy from its ability to deliver continual economic expansion.
- The historical memory of the Second World War remains contested, although relations between China and Japan have improved from their nadir in 2012–13. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's attempt to 'turn the page' in his 2015 statement marking the 70th anniversary of the end of the war was broadly welcomed in Japan without inciting a destabilizing level of Chinese opposition. Japan/South Korea relations, however, have not seen this level of relative rapprochement.
- The US remains the key actor in the region helping to maintain stability: the erratic nature of the Donald Trump administration, along with the president's substituting of transactional acts for any seriously strategic approach, is potentially destabilizing in a region which is already a security flashpoint.
- There is no alternative but for the countries of the region to continue to improve confidence-building measures and seek multilateral solutions to global and regional problems.

Introduction

The March 2018 Chatham House conference on the topic of governance, leadership and legitimacy compared political and government systems in the three major political and economic powers in East Asia.¹ It considered the systems in the context of the historical and political legitimacy of different leadership models in China, Japan and South Korea, and assessed the implications of these differences for the international order.

Reviewing this subject a year later, it is difficult not to approach it in the developing context of the growth of populism worldwide. Increasingly, we are seeing challenges to the assumption that the optimal model of government is the representative parliamentary democracy. Instead, the idea of the ‘strong man’ leader is returning to the fore, backed up by resort to plebiscites where necessary to secure the backing of the so-called ‘popular will’. The idea of politics as the rational negotiation within different representative and interest groups of alternative policy choices, in pursuit of the most acceptable and practical social outcomes, is seen in some quarters as an invention of the elites to thwart the will of the people.² It is being replaced by a different model in which complex choices are simplified and alternative voices to the ‘popular will’ discredited and delegitimized. The concept of social partnership, developed after a long process of bargaining and compromise, gives way to the assertion of pure political power.

It is difficult not to approach the subject of governance, leadership and legitimacy in East Asia in the developing context of the growth of populism worldwide. Increasingly, we are seeing challenges to the assumption that the optimal model of government is the representative parliamentary democracy.

We have been here before. ‘Who, whom?’, Lenin is supposed to have said at the second All-Russian Congress of Political Education Departments in October 1921 – or, more accurately, ‘who will overtake whom?’, as the principle of ‘socialism in one country’ challenged the hegemony of Western capitalism. It was Stalin, eight years later, in a speech to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, who truncated the question to its current, more familiar form – and removed the idea that continuous competition between the two systems might be part of the equation. ‘Will we knock the capitalists flat or will they do the same to us?’ The phrase has become a shorthand way of reducing a difference of view to a statement of inevitable supremacy of one interest over another. Thus, the concept of zero-sum politics was born.

Many of us have lived through an era in which the impact of the zero-sum approach to ideology has been cruelly apparent. The first half of the 20th century saw the destruction (in most countries) of the fascist model of political society; the second half, at least in Europe, the discrediting and failure of communism. ‘The choice we face in the next generation,’ the late Tony Judt observed

¹ For more details, see Chatham House (2018), ‘Governance, Leadership and Legitimacy in East Asia’, 26 March 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/governance-leadership-and-legitimacy-east-asia> (accessed 28 Jun. 2019).

² As discussed by Jan-Werner Müller: ‘It can often seem that populists claim to represent the common good as willed by the people. On closer inspection, it turns out that what matters for populists is less the product of a genuine process of will-formation or a common good that anyone with common sense can glean than a symbolic representation of the ‘real people’ from which the correct policy is then deduced. This renders the political position of populist immune to empirical refutation. Populists can always play off the ‘real people’ or ‘silent majority’ against elected representatives and the official outcome of a vote.’ Müller, J.-W. (2017), *What Is Populism?*, London: Penguin Books Ltd, p. 102.

in his last dialogue with the historian Timothy Snyder, ‘is not capitalism versus communism, or the end of history versus the return of history, but the politics of social cohesion based around collective purposes versus the erosion of society by the politics of fear.’³

Although the zero-sum calculation is perhaps different today, questions of governance, leadership and legitimacy will be no less relevant if the aim is to build bridges and forge partnerships rather than project power and enforce compliance (or even servitude). Who makes the rules of a society, and how transparently and accountably are they made? How can they be changed, and against what criteria is this process taken forward? Who has the responsibility for negotiating this process with different social and economic interest groups, and from what sources do these people – the leaders of a society – draw their right to oversee and control the legislative and executive functions of the society they lead?

There are many examples throughout the world where these questions are being actively and sometimes stridently debated. This essay is about Asia, not the UK, but it is striking that British democracy has been infected with the virus of populism, and that we are now seeing democratically elected politicians questioning the authority of an elected parliament to take any course of action other than following the ‘popular will’, even to the extent of questioning the desirability of maintaining democratic institutions themselves.⁴ Those arguing against a Brexit chosen by referendum have described the process as flawed and corrupted, and one that has led to a chaotic and undeliverable policy outcome. They have been challenged by those arguing that failure to deliver ‘the will of the people’ would be a fundamental betrayal of a democratic vote in which 72 per cent of the electorate participated. Although the *substance* of the arguments in favour of ‘leave’ and ‘remain’ respectively is being challenged, so to a degree are the nature and quality of the democratic process that has led to the impasse. In other words, is a plebiscite more legitimate than a vote by parliamentary representatives? Although the current constitutional crisis in the UK over the decision to leave the European Union is outside the scope of this paper, it is becoming an object lesson in how the principles of democracy and political leadership can buckle under the strain of unresolved questions of governance and legitimacy.

Political comparisons

In East Asia, these issues can be seen as much through the prism of rivalry between nations as through the prism of competition for influence and resources between political and social organizations within specific countries. As the 2018 Chatham House conference entitled ‘Governance, Leadership and Legitimacy in East Asia’ elaborated, there are conflicting political models in Japan, South Korea and China, arising from very different political traditions and post-war experiences, and with different sources of governmental and leadership legitimacy.

³ Judt, T. and Snyder, T. (2012), *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, London: Penguin Books Ltd, p. 386.

⁴ For example, the former Brexit minister, Steve Baker MP, was quoted as having said, doubtless rhetorically, ‘I could tear this place down and bulldoze it into the river’ in response to the prospect of the prime minister’s withdrawal deal being put to MPs for the third time. Wilcock, D. (2019), ‘Brexit Steve Baker brands May’s speech a ‘pantomime’ and threatens to QUIT the Tories if her Brexit deal passes’, *Daily Mail*, 27 March 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6857693/Brexit-Steve-Baker-brands-Mays-speech-pantomime-threatens-QUIT-Tories.html> (accessed 21 Jun. 2019). The willingness of some of the candidates in the 2019 Conservative Party leadership election to contemplate the proroguing of Parliament to ensure that the UK leaves the EU by 31 October is another example.

South Korea and Japan rank 21st and 22nd respectively in the current edition of the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index. The two countries fall into the category of 'flawed democracies',⁵ just below the 'full democracies' section in the index. Both their overall rankings are dragged down by their sub-scores for the functioning of government (on which Japan outscores South Korea), political participation (on which South Korea outscores Japan) and political culture. China, at 130th on the list, is one of 53 'authoritarian' countries where there are no free and fair elections, and where there are serious deficiencies in terms of political culture, political process and respect for civil liberties. This comparative ranking allows politicians in each country to argue rhetorically about liberal democratic values or their absence. But it does not offer a reliable sense of the *sources* of legitimacy in each country, nor does it adequately capture the internal and external *threats* to that legitimacy.

The political structures in the three countries are, of course, very different. Japan is a state that recovered from abject defeat and destruction in the Second World War, to build a world-leading industrial economy and develop a democratic system that has increasingly exposed its politicians to what Takako Hikotani, at the Chatham House conference, described as 'a more volatile and discriminating public'. South Korea has made the transition from autocracy to democracy much more recently, after prolonged periods of dictatorship and martial law. In both cases, the external power of the US set the framework within which political institutions initially developed, often in adversarial competition with Soviet Russia.

In Japan, this process involved the imposition of a pacifist constitution in 1947 and the negotiation of the US–Japan security alliance of 1960. On the Korean peninsula, the temporary division of 1945, widely opposed by Koreans across the political spectrum, hardened by 1948 into the creation of two separate states. The United Nations' attempt to elect a government for the whole of Korea failed, as did North Korea's attempt to impose reunification by force in the face of the military response of the UN (dominated by the US). The 1953 armistice agreement stopped the conflict but maintained the division.⁶

China, by contrast, is an autocracy combining Communist Party dominance and a high level of political control over the terms within which politicians can be held accountable (witness the abolition under President Xi Jinping of the two-term presidential limit). Under the present leadership, the country has seen radical re-education programmes and the reintroduction of the personality cult, as well as a degree of open intellectual discourse, within strict party-defined limits, and heavily controlled local democracy, accompanied by a tough media clampdown.⁷

The delivery of economic benefits is not the only element of a government's claim to legitimacy – the security of the state and the ability to articulate a sense of national identity will also be factors. But since the return to power of Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe, in 2012 (five and a half years after his first, unsuccessful, premiership, cut short by illness), it has been the economy's performance that appears to have resonated more with voters as far as the popularity of the government has been concerned.

⁵ A category that includes the US and 16 members of the EU, including France and Italy.

⁶ In both Japan and Korea, there have of course been pre-war antecedents of democratic processes. In Japan during the Taishō and early Shōwa eras, there was a degree of democratic innovation, drawing eclectically from other parliamentary democracies; in Korea, the March 1st movement, suppressed by the Japanese colonial government, led after 1919 to the establishment of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea, based in Shanghai. In this context, the US can be seen as the catalyst rather than the originator of change.

⁷ For an analysis of the suppression of media (including social media) and dissent, and the backlash that has followed, see Schlesinger, D., Henochowicz, A. and Wang, Y. (2016), 'Why Xi Jinping's media controls are "Absolutely Unyielding"', *Foreign Policy*, 17 March 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/17/why-xi-jinpings-media-controls-absolutely-unyielding-censorship-china-economy-speech/> (accessed 21 Jun. 19); Human Rights Watch (2017), 'China: Free Xinjiang "Political Education" Detainees', 10 September 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/10/china-free-xinjiang-political-education-detainees> (accessed 21 Jun. 19); and Wang, X. (2018), 'As fears of Xi's personality cult deepen, China must dial down the propaganda', *South China Morning Post*, 24 March 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/2138481/fears-xis-personality-cult-deepen-china-must-dial-down-propaganda> (accessed 21 Jun. 19).

Abe's *policy* emphasis, since 2012, has been on reform of Japan's pacifist constitution to allow a more proactive role for the country's Self-Defense Forces (SDF). In his proposed constitutional reforms, he has stressed a rebalancing towards personal responsibilities rather than universal rights. In part this is a desire to rehabilitate the legacy of his nationalist grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, prime minister from 1957 to 1960, who had to resign following the demonstrations against the passing of the 1960 US–Japan security treaty, which led to the cancellation of President Dwight Eisenhower's scheduled trip to Japan. But public views of Abe's policy goals in this area remain divided.⁸ Japanese voters, in general, have more ambivalence about amending Article 9 of the constitution (which enshrines the principle of pacifism) than about the general principle of political agency giving effect to constitutional change. More importance is also attached to Abe sorting out the problems in the economy.⁹ His economic policies – widely dubbed 'Abenomics' – have been a higher voter priority than self-defence. Nor has the evidence of voter engagement been particularly encouraging during Abe's tenure, with general election turnout never reaching 60 per cent in any of the three elections held since 2012, and the two most recent (2014 and 2017) recording overall turnouts of 52.6 and 53.7 per cent respectively – the lowest overall votes in any Japanese general election since the Second World War.

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Perhaps this is to be expected in a mature democracy where politicians are managing a country at a very different stage of political and economic development from, say, South Korea. In Japan, the years of rapid economic growth came to an end with the bursting of the asset bubble on New Year's Eve, 1989. The emphasis has since been on finding ways to kick-start the economy above a consistently lower level of growth, without a clear consensus for the sort of radical restructuring applied to some other developed economies (and with some commentators arguing for an economic model premised on slower growth after the Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011). Growth in GDP per capita in Japan has actually outperformed that in the rest of the G7 during the Abe years,¹⁰ and a high level of technological innovation and industrial competitiveness has helped the process of adaptation to a society with a shrinking and ageing population.¹¹

⁸ For an interesting assessment of the shifts in the public's views of possible constitutional revision, and the arguments in favour of it, as seen by both liberal and conservative voters, concluding that 'the public has been fairly split over this question ... over the past two decades', see Smith, S. and Teraoka, A. (2016), 'Japanese Public Opinion on Constitutional Revision in 2016', Council on Foreign Relations blog, 1 August 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/japanese-public-opinion-constitutional-revision-2016> (accessed 21 Jun. 2019).

⁹ A Kyodo News poll of November 2017 showed that while the approval rating for the Abe cabinet had risen to 49.5 per cent following the autumn general election, more than half of those polled disapproved of the proposals for constitutional reform: those opposed to amending the pacifist clause in the constitution accounted for 52.6 per cent of respondents, while those in favour of doing so accounted for 38.3 per cent. When asked about the issues which the Abe administration should make a priority, the list was headed with welfare, healthcare, pensions, the economy generally and childcare policies. *Japan Times* (2017), 'Abe's Cabinet approval rating improves, but constitutional reform still unpopular, survey says', 3 November 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/11/03/national/politics-diplomacy/abes-cabinet-approval-rating-improves-constitutional-reform-still-unpopular-survey-says/#.XRCtHKB7nct> (accessed 24 Jun. 2019).

¹⁰ McCrum, D. (2018), 'Japan's economic miracle', *Financial Times*, 9 April 2018, <https://ftalphaville.ft.com/2018/04/09/1523246400000/Japan-s-economic-miracle/> (accessed 24 Jun. 2019).

¹¹ Current estimates are that the population – just under 127 million in 2019 – will fall to 108.8 million by 2050, and that the median age will rise from 48.2 to 53.2. Approximately 42 per cent of the population is expected to be over the age of 60 by that date. See Statista (2014), 'Share of population of selected countries expected to be over 60 years of age by 2050', <https://www.statista.com/statistics/298800/population-share-over-60-china-japan-us/> (accessed 24 Jun. 2019).

The headwinds from a slowdown in China and the threat of US–Japan and US–China trade wars could drive the Japanese economy off-course: Japanese industrial output in March 2019 was down 4.6 per cent year on year, marking its sharpest fall since 2015, and at the time of writing the Economist Intelligence Unit’s forecast for GDP growth in 2019 is just 1.0 per cent. But the underlying trends – of stability as well as efficiency and productivity – point towards a continuation of slow but steady growth, albeit not a dramatic economic recovery, as Chatham House Chair Jim O’Neill noted in an article in February 2019.¹²

In South Korea, as Jiyeon Kim pointed out in the conference, the attitudes of the voters have developed differently in recent years. Before 2013, voters prioritized economic growth; but since 2013, there seems to have been a shift in preferences, especially among younger voters, towards more value-driven policies. There is now an increasing popular focus on economic redistribution, global issues and civic principles – a shift that, though not necessarily linked to a desire to prioritize unification with the North, perhaps reflects more distinct (if still contested, by some older voters) ideas of South Korean identity. As John Nilsson-Wright points out in relation to the 2017 impeachment of President Park Geun-hye, identity politics have partly driven political challenge:

For the 77% of Koreans backing impeachment ... including hundreds of thousands of young and middle-aged voters ... Ms Park’s failings have been proof of the wider institutional and political shortcomings of the country ... [including] privilege and corruption within the economic elites ... favouritism and lack of transparency within an education system that should ideally provide social mobility ... and an authoritarian predisposition on the part of Ms Park to blacklist her political rivals.¹³

The background to these developments has been the ability of successive South Korean governments to keep the economic wheels turning: despite the effects of the slowdown in the global economy in recent years,¹⁴ the country has sustained annual GDP growth of around 2–3 per cent for most of the past decade (having also maintained solid growth in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1998).¹⁵

In China, the legitimacy of the regime derives again from its ability to deliver a high level of continued economic expansion. Real GDP growth has averaged nearly 10 per cent each year since market-driven reforms were first introduced in the late 1970s. This has helped China to achieve the Millennium Development Goals in 2015 and lift 800 million people out of poverty. The slowing of Chinese growth rates during this decade has been accompanied by a resurgence of political control over nascent democratic processes, and over the ability of citizens to challenge the status quo – although mass incidents of protest appear to be rising around the country.¹⁶

¹² O’Neill, J. (2019), ‘What Japan Could Teach Other Developed Countries’, Chatham House Expert Comment, 7 February 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/what-japan-could-teach-other-developed-countries> (accessed 24 Jun. 2019).

¹³ Nilsson-Wright, J. (2017), ‘Park Geun-hye: How identity politics fuelled South Korean scandal’, BBC News, 10 March 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-39228815> (accessed 24 Jun. 2019).

¹⁴ And indeed, during the previous financial crisis, in the face of such a slowdown, as with Kim Dae-jung, who took office in the wake of the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98, and during whose presidency the South Korean economy bounced back from a 5.8 per cent fall in 1998 to grow by over 10 per cent the following year: an example of where economic growth in a difficult climate brought political solidarity.

¹⁵ International Monetary Fund (2019), World Economic Outlook Database, April 2019, https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2019/01/weodata/weorept.aspx?sy=1995&ey=2019&scsm=1&ssd=1&sort=country&ds=.&br=1&pr1.x=26&pr1.y=8&c=542&s=NGDP_RPCH&grp=0&a= (accessed 18 Jul. 2019).

¹⁶ On the level of public protest, see, for example, *The Economist* (2018), ‘Why protests are so common in China’, 4 October 2018, <https://www.economist.com/china/2018/10/04/why-protests-are-so-common-in-china> (accessed 24 Jun. 2019). This article quotes a Hong Kong-based NGO as identifying at least 1,300 labour protests in 2018, estimated to be approximately a tenth of the real number, as well as an increase in wage disputes and protests, many led by students, against illegal land confiscation and sexual harassment. An academic at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing is quoted as saying that the ‘astonishing’ number of protests has had ‘no impact on China’s political stability’.

The broader context is also important. China, South Korea and Japan are competitors as well as economic partners. They are rivals for influence and status within a region in which there are security tensions, nuclear flashpoints, and no clear and uncontested historical memory on which a common set of values and priorities can be based.¹⁷ The impact of the conflicting bases of each of these polities on the international order needs to be seen in this framework.

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The historical memory

In his remarks at the March 2018 conference, Rana Mitter drew attention to the need to pursue ‘more fruitful analysis’ than simply comparing China as a one-party state to Japan as a parliamentary democracy, by ‘considering the nature of identity and countries’ links to history and their perceptions of themselves and each other’.¹⁸ The current and recent generations of East Asian leaders are obviously sensitive to such perceptions. Abe is the son of a foreign minister¹⁹ and the grandson of a prime minister, Nobusuke Kishi, whose political legacy, as a member of the Tōjō wartime cabinet and later as a Class A war criminal suspect, is highly controversial. South Korea’s president, Moon Jae-in, is the child of refugees from North Korea and was an activist against the regime of his predecessor’s father, Park Chung-hee, who served in the Manchukuo Imperial Army during the Pacific War. Park’s daughter, Park Guen-hye, was president from 2013 to 2017, the period of maximum pressure on Korean–Japanese relations. Xi Jinping’s father, Xi Zhongxun, served with the Communist guerrillas in the northwest of China, is said to have given Mao Zedong refuge at the end of the Long March in 1934, fought the Japanese as a member of the Yan’an Soviet until 1945, and was later purged during the Cultural Revolution before being rehabilitated and appointed to the Politburo under Deng Xiaoping.²⁰ The history of East Asia in the 20th century is finely integrated into these politicians’ life experiences. It is unsurprising that the contested history of the relations between these three countries continues to be reflected in their actions and words.

It often seems counter-intuitive, for Western commentators, to think of the continuing arguments over history and the rifts between the Pacific War adversaries as issues of geopolitics rather than morality. In Western Europe, we like to think we have a different historical narrative – Germany’s explicit expiation of guilt for its wartime atrocities, and the rebuilding of peaceful and interdependent economic and political communities under the auspices of the (erstwhile) European Economic Community (EEC), NATO, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, etc.,

¹⁷ This is also to a degree the case in Europe, as the EU has enlarged to include some of the former Eastern European states; but the existence of the Union and its institutions provides a very different environment within which to work through the political tensions that can arise.

¹⁸ Chatham House (2018), ‘Governance, Leadership and Legitimacy in East Asia’, Meeting Summary, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/governance-leadership-and-legitimacy-east-asia> (accessed 27 Jun. 2019).

¹⁹ Shintaro Abe, foreign minister during the prime ministership of Yasuhiro Nakasone (1982–86).

²⁰ Song, Y. (ed) (2014), *Biographical Dictionary of the People’s Republic of China*, Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland and Company, p. 335.

meaning that the moral trajectory of the 1930s and 1940s is relatively uncontested.²¹ This is not the case in East Asia, and the extent to which the US, as security guarantor, has both shaped the terms of democratization in Japan and South Korea and been required to manage the tensions between historical adversaries since 1945 has complicated the picture.

The Japanese government's formal position is that the issues relating to the historical residue of its colonial rule of Korea in the first half of the 20th century, and the specific infringements of human rights towards, for example, the so-called 'comfort women', coerced into prostitution for the Imperial Army in the 1930s and 1940s, were resolved when relations were normalized in 1965. But the democratic legitimacy of the regime that agreed to that normalization and the terms under which the then South Korean government implemented the agreement are not accepted by today's generation of Korean politicians.²²

In parallel, the unresolved question of the islands in the East China Sea, known to the Japanese as the Senkaku-tō and to China as the Diayoutai, led to a grave deterioration in relations between the two countries in 2012 after the then Japanese government sought to 'nationalize' the islands to prevent extreme right-wingers taking possession of them. The issue over territorial rights goes back to the end of the Pacific War, but also involves a disagreement about whether the islands, effectively controlled by Japan since the late 19th century, were deemed to have been covered by the 1943 Cairo Declaration setting out Allied war aims against Japan. As China–Japan relations deteriorated precipitously in 2012 and 2013, the anti-Japanese rhetoric emanating from China reflected not just arcane territorial arguments, but the intense and apparently unresolved historical memory of wartime suffering in the 1930s and 1940s²³ (as well, of course, as shifting economic power).²⁴

Countries' relationships are not solely defined by the rhetoric of their leaders. The economic relations of the major countries in East Asia remain integral to their national interests: around 36 per cent of Japan's exports go to China, South Korea and Taiwan; and nearly a quarter of Chinese exports go to other markets in northeast Asia. Levels of popular distrust and disapproval may be high, but Chinese tourism in Japan remains buoyant: a survey in 2017²⁵ showed that, with nearly 7 and a half million tourists annually, China accounted for 25.6 per cent of all foreign visitors to Japan, a figure that had risen by 680 per cent since 2007. It has been argued that views of Japan among younger Koreans, who care less about the legacy of colonialism than their parents, are more positive: but evidence is conflicting, and

²¹ Although there are pressures in the other direction. As a number of commentators have pointed out, in addition to a nostalgic imperialism, which lies behind some older conservative voters' preference for Brexit, is a tendency to reinterpret the history of the Second World War so that it becomes a conflict won by Britain alone, rather than in alliance firstly with the British empire, from 1941 with the US, and eventually and definitively with the Soviet Union. More sinisterly, there are the efforts of elements in *Alternative für Deutschland* to question Germany's expression of guilt for the Holocaust; Poland's attempts to enact a law making it illegal to suggest that there had been any Polish complicity in Nazi crimes in the 1940s; and the remarks of the Italian president of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani of *Forza Italia*, that Mussolini and the pre-war Fascist government had done positive as well as negative things etc.

²² And this question is now additionally complicated by the lawsuits against Japanese industrial firms accused in the South Korean courts of using Korean slave labour during the Pacific War.

²³ Chinese views of Japan and Japanese views of China were measured by a BBC World Service poll in July 2017. This was at a point when the bilateral political relationship was beginning to recover after several years of chilly stand-off. However, although positive Chinese views of Japan had increased substantially from the previous poll, they still accounted for only 22 per cent of respondents (compared with a positive view of Japan, on average, of 55 per cent among the other Asian countries surveyed). Moreover, negative Chinese views of Japan were the highest for any country surveyed, at 75 per cent. BBC World Service Poll (2017), 'Sharp Drop in World Views of US, UK: Global Poll', 4 July 2017, https://globescan.com/images/images/pressreleases/bbc2017_country_ratings/BBC2017_Country_Ratings_Poll.pdf (accessed 24 Jun. 2019). Japanese views of China were not recorded in this poll, but a Pew Research report recorded a 78 per cent 'unfavourable' view of China in Japan, against 17 per cent 'favourable'. Pew Research Center (2018), 'Countries' views of Japan, Abe; Japanese views of China', <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/11/12/countries-views-of-japan-abe-japanese-views-of-china/> (accessed 24 Jun. 2019).

²⁴ China overtook Japan to become the second-largest economy in dollar terms in 2010, with GDP of \$5.8 trillion compared with \$5.474 trillion for Japan. BBC News (2011), 'China overtakes Japan as world's second-biggest economy', 14 February 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-12427321> (accessed 24 Jun. 2019).

²⁵ Tani, S. (2018), 'Where are all the tourists in Japan coming from?', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 17 January 2018.

the recent upsurge of anti-Japanese feeling over the ‘comfort women’ has transcended the generations.²⁶ Although the relative easing of political tensions between China and Japan in 2018 may to a degree reflect the extent to which the two countries’ economies, and perhaps also their popular cultures, are intertwined, there is much less evidence of any such movement in South Korea–Japan relations.

Although the relative easing of political tensions between China and Japan in 2018 may reflect the extent to which the two countries’ economies, and perhaps also their popular cultures, are intertwined, there is much less evidence of any such movement in South Korea–Japan relations.

The focus of the Japanese government’s attempts to come to terms with history has been the various statements made by prime ministers to mark anniversaries of the end of the Pacific War. In 1995, on the 50th anniversary, Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama issued a statement of apology²⁷ making explicitly clear that national policy had been mistaken, that Japanese rule in East Asia had been ‘colonial’ and that Japan had been ‘aggressive’. All Japanese prime ministers since have endorsed that statement. But when Abe in his second premiership came to make a statement on the 70th anniversary of the end of the war, he wanted to go further, and commissioned a 16-strong advisory panel of academics, former officials and journalists (under the chairmanship of Shinichi Kitaoka, president of the International University of Japan), whose deliberations informed the outcome.²⁸ As this author argued at the time,²⁹ Abe was trying to do two things: he wanted to reassert Japanese acceptance of the need to express ‘deep remorse and heartfelt apology’, while at the same time making the statement in a way that enabled the next generation of Japanese to turn the page of history. This lay behind his setting out the historical context (which invited accusations of revisionism, although he did – for the first time – mention former prisoners of war, and included coy language about ‘women behind the battlefields whose honour and dignity were severely injured’). Moreover, while reiterating the need for Japan ‘to squarely face the history of the past’, he asserted the national and international values of contemporary Japan, in order to establish a basis on which current and future generations of Japanese should not feel eternally obliged to apologize for their parents’ and grandparents’ actions.³⁰

Abe received broad support for the statement within Japan. Predictably, he was criticized by China for tinkering with the Murayama statement, but the actual criticism that he received for tilting towards the revisionist end of the political spectrum was more moderate in tone than the rhetoric at the height of the crisis between the two countries. It fell well short of the sort of anger that had

²⁶ Noland, M. (2014), ‘South Korean Attitudes Towards China and Japan: Complex Issues of Identity Refracted Through Geopolitics’, Peterson Institute for International Economics, 23 September 2014, <https://piie.com/blogs/north-korea-witness-transformation/south-korean-attitudes-toward-china-and-japan-complex> (accessed 24 Jun. 2019). Noland argues, on the basis of TNS Korea polling, that South Korean attitudes towards these countries are as much functions of attitudes towards the US, and that therefore ‘younger, better-educated South Koreans have a more cosmopolitan view, seeing Japan in the context of a liberal, US-led order in which both Japan and South Korea have benefited greatly, and put less weight on the past’. This does not feel like a description of the relationship in 2019.

²⁷ The relevant paragraph of the full text read: ‘During a certain period in the not too distant past, Japan, following a mistaken national policy, advanced along the road to war, only to ensnare the Japanese people in a fateful crisis, and, through its colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations. In the hope that no such mistake be made in the future, I regard, in a spirit of humility, these irrefutable facts of history, and express here once again my feelings of deep remorse and state my heartfelt apology. Allow me also to express my feelings of profound mourning for all victims, both at home and abroad, of that history.’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (1995), ‘Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama “On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the war’s end”’, 15 August 1995, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/pm/murayama/9508.html> (accessed 24 Jun 2019).

²⁸ Reynolds, I. (2015), ‘Abe’s War Statement Not as ‘Right-Wing’ as Adviser Feared’, Bloomberg, 19 August 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-19/abe-s-war-statement-not-as-right-wing-as-adviser-feared> (accessed 24 Jun. 2019). Kitaoka was quoted after the statement as saying that it had been ‘less right-wing than he had feared’.

²⁹ Warren, D. (2015), ‘Abe Navigates History in Anniversary Speech’, Chatham House Expert Comment, 19 August 2015, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/abe-navigates-history-anniversary-speech> (accessed 27 Jun. 2019).

³⁰ Ibid.

been regularly meted out, for example, towards Japanese politicians visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, where Class A war criminals are commemorated.³¹ This suggested that the attempt to walk this political tightrope had been successful. This was partly a question of calibrating the terms of the apology. But it was also an attempt to negotiate between Abe's different political constituencies – the nationalists and revisionists who object to Japan continually having to apologize for its history, and the pragmatists who recognize that an apology is appropriate and that Japan's relationships with its regional partners, and therefore its ability to pursue an activist foreign policy, depend on its tone. It might be described as an attempt to demonstrate a form of leadership that steers both the internal political and the external historical debates in directions that enable Japan to address the constitutional questions that the current administration thinks important, and that set the terms within which the continuing arguments over history, and Japan's international profile, will be carried forward.

The attempt worked, as the relative rapprochement between Japan and China throughout 2017 and 2018 demonstrated (although air and sea incursions by China in the seas around the disputed islands in the East China Sea have continued).³² While there are underlying structural issues, it is the broader economic and political context that will determine where the centre of gravity of the continuing argument about history lies at any specific time.³³ The temptation must always be to deflect challenges to political leadership by invoking actual or perceived challenges from outside the polity: appeals, explicit or implicit, to nationalism are never far away in any of these countries. This may lie behind Chinese hostility to Japan at a time when China's economy is slowing and challenges to its domestic political status quo are increasing, especially on social media (even if the leadership is apprehensive about inciting too much open hostility against a foreign enemy, lest those expressing this seek other avenues of complaint and protest nearer home).³⁴

The same syndrome is perceived to occur in democracies such as South Korea and Japan, where recent complaints by the Japanese government over aggressive actions by the South Korean coastguard and navy towards a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) surveillance aircraft are attributed (by Korean sources) to Prime Minister Abe needing to boost his falling popularity ratings

³¹ Abe had become the first prime minister since Jun'ichiro Koizumi to visit the shrine in 2013. Koizumi had promised to visit the shrine annually when he campaigned to become prime minister in 2001, and the pledge assured him nationalist support. An opinion poll in the conservative *Sankei Shimbun* newspaper indicated that 53 per cent of Japanese disapproved of Abe's visit, because of its impact on relations with other countries.

³² 'By the end of 2012, Japan Coast Guard reported that Chinese coast guard ships had intruded into Senkaku territorial waters 68 times ... the campaign continued, with 188 vessels penetrating the territorial sea in 2013, 88 in 2014, 86 in 2015, and 121 in 2016. Since mid-2014, on average, Chinese government vessels have penetrated the territorial seas seven to nine times a month and have carried out 70 to 90 incursions in the contiguous zone.' RAND Corporation (2018), *China's Military Activities in the East China Sea: Implications for Japan's Self-Defense Force*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2574/RAND_RR2574.pdf (accessed 27 Jun. 2019).

³³ The most striking example of this is the reported statement by Mao Zedong to the then Japanese prime minister, Kakuei Tanaka, in 1972, when Tanaka apologized for Japanese actions during the war, and Mao told him that there was no need: 'You destroyed the Kuomintang, you helped us to come to power.' See, for example, BBC News (2014), 'China and Japan: Seven decades of bitterness', 13 February 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-25411700> (accessed 27 Jun. 2019). The Chinese line at the time is understandable, given Chinese interest in maintaining Japan as a counterbalance against Soviet power in the East Asian region. The alleged statement by Mao is now disputed by some Chinese spokespeople, but China did not press for reparations from Japan at that time.

³⁴ 'Nationalist opinion is a powerful driver of China's Japan policy [and] the demands of nationalist legitimization appear to pressurise the elite to respond to popular nationalism.' See Gries, P., Steiger, D. and Wang, T. (2016), 'Popular Nationalism and China's Japan Policy: the Diaoyu Islands protests, 2012–2013', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 25 (98): pp. 264–76, doi: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1075714 (accessed 27 Jun. 2019). Rana Mitter, at the 2018 conference, quoted the example of President Xi highlighting the contribution of nationalist army veterans in the commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Chatham House (2018), 'Governance, Leadership and Legitimacy in East Asia'. Kerry Brown also notes 'the almost obsessive reference to this trope of national regeneration. It is the centrally orientating idea of the Xi era and it manifests itself in the status that China's economy has not attained for the country'. See Brown, K. (2018), 'Chinese Nationalism: The Dog That Barks in the Night', *The Diplomat*, 16 November 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/chinese-nationalism-the-dog-that-barks-in-the-night/> (accessed 27 Jun. 2019).

by alleging hostile action by Korean forces.³⁵ A similar critique of ‘displacement anger’ is made by some commentators about anti-Japanese feelings in South Korea – see Robert Kelly’s article, ‘Why South Korea is so obsessed with Japan’, in which he argues that Japan is a ‘useful other’ for South Korea, occupying the place that ‘should really be held by North Korea’, with which the South is in an unresolved conflict over which country most accurately reflects the pure racial identity of Korea.³⁶

It is not inevitable that this type of displacement activity should characterize countries’ relationships. To counter it, there has been an attempt to create a dynamic towards closer partnership, mutualizing areas of policy where closer cooperation makes effective policy formation easier.

It is not inevitable that this type of displacement activity should characterize countries’ relationships in this way. To counter it, there has been an attempt to create a dynamic towards closer partnership, mutualizing areas of policy where closer cooperation makes effective policy formation easier. This was taken forward in a series of intermittent trilateral summits between China, South Korea and Japan from 2008. These have been part of the diplomatic toolbox over the past decade, even in the wake of serious rifts between the countries over territorial and other issues. After various interruptions, the summit process resumed in 2018, with a meeting in Tokyo in May. Unsurprisingly, the strongest evidence of commitment to joint working was in the economic field, with agreement to accelerate negotiations on free trade between the three countries. The summit also agreed on the need to push for faster progress on a high-quality Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP); the importance of resisting protectionism; and a statement on the protection of intellectual property rights, to which China was prepared to put its name. Moreover, in the margins, where bilateral meetings took place, there were Japan/China agreements on defence communication mechanisms in the East China Sea, and a public-sector/private-sector council on the implications of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

But the shifting patterns of leadership and legitimacy already described mean that the agreements to build closer relationships are always at the mercy of wider political and economic pressures, as well as – in the cases of Japan and South Korea – the autonomy of other institutions, such as South Korea’s constitutional court. The Japan/South Korea mood music in Tokyo in May 2018 was reasonably positive. This did not, however, prevent the links between the two countries taking a downturn later in the year, as a consequence of lawsuits against Japanese companies over wartime slave labour and a resurgence of anger over the ‘comfort women’ issue. (At time of writing, there is evidence of the beginning of a move back towards more civil relations, with a speech by the South Korean prime minister, Lee Nak-yeon, expressing eagerness to see an improvement in relations between the two countries – but we have been here before.)³⁷

³⁵ Japan claims that a radar lock from a South Korean Class-1 destroyer targeted a JMSDF P-1 surveillance aircraft, which would constitute a hostile act; South Korea denies this and accuses the Japanese aircraft of flying ‘dangerously low’. See Yoon, S. (2015), ‘Japan and Korea’s Unnecessary Squabble’, *The Diplomat*, 12 January 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/japan-and-south-koreas-unnecessary-squabble/> (accessed 27 Jun. 2019).

³⁶ Kelly, R. (2015), ‘Why South Korea is so obsessed with Japan’, *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 4 June 2015, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/why-south-korea-so-obsessed-japan> (accessed 27 Jun. 2019).

³⁷ *Japan Times* (2019), ‘South Korean Prime Minister says he’s keen to improve ties with Japan’, 31 March 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/03/31/national/politics-diplomacy/south-korean-prime-minister-says-hes-keen-improve-ties-japan/#.XRTIuqB7ncs> (accessed 27 Jun. 2019).

The overture, if that is what it proves to be, appears to be a result of active US diplomacy, although pressure for an improvement in bilateral relations has been constant in recent years without great effect.³⁸ The competition between different forms of governance, the contested view of history, the tendency to manage internal tensions by playing up external ones – all these factors are managed or exacerbated in accordance with the US's willingness both to play a role as guarantor of regional security and to set a coherent strategic approach to East Asian policy. Both objectives have been called into question under the Trump administration.

The US role and the wider context

The belated realization that a worsening relationship between Japan and South Korea has a negative impact on US objectives, and on peace and security in East Asia, comes after a prolonged period of silence on the issue from US policymakers. This has been consistent with the erratic attitude – well documented by a number of critical commentators – of the Trump administration to the formation of policy, the processes of government and the need to ensure the highest-quality personnel to oversee all this and speak truth to power when necessary.³⁹

US policy towards East Asia under the Trump administration has concentrated on the following areas:

- A continued trade confrontation with China, which may result in a negotiated solution, but which has been based on mercantilist assumptions, and in which the US has not made common cause with its allies in the region or elsewhere (not least since it has picked trade fights with them as well).
- An effort, after decades of unsuccessful attempts, to kick-start a negotiated agreement on denuclearizing the Korean peninsula by raising the negotiating level to that of head of state.
- A disinclination to follow multilateral routes to solve major problems – as evidenced in the holding of talks between Trump and the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, rather than six-party talks; and in the US's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) almost immediately after Trump took office.
- A willingness to disdain the strategic objectives of the US's major ally in the region, Japan, in spite of the care Prime Minister Abe has taken to try to build a closer relationship with the US.

Sheila Smith of the US Council on Foreign Relations has published a trenchant critique of this approach. As she argues, the trade conflict is simply aimed at shifting the imbalance in a direction more favourable to the US, with no attempt to tackle the serious structural issues. The North Korean negotiations have seen 'no progress in getting Pyongyang to catalogue its nuclear and missile facilities nor to open its production sites for international inspection'⁴⁰ – and with the US president

³⁸ The press report cited refers to an editorial in the South Korean daily newspaper *JoongAng Ilbo*, citing a speech by the US ambassador to South Korea critical of the continued deterioration of bilateral Japanese/Korean relations.

³⁹ See, as a recent example, Blinken, A. (2019), 'No People, No Process, No Policy', *New York Times*, 28 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/28/opinion/trump-foreign-policy-crisis.html> (accessed 27 Jun. 2019). The continuing slowness of the State Department appointments process under the Trump administration has also been a factor. President Trump assumed office in January 2017. There was no US ambassador to South Korea until June 2018.

⁴⁰ Smith, S. (2019), 'US policy in Asia heads from bad to worse', *East Asia Forum*, 10 February 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/02/10/us-policy-in-asia-heads-from-bad-to-worse/> (accessed 27 Jun. 2019).

temperamentally inclined to pre-empt developments by declaring success prematurely, eagerness ‘to create evidence of foreign policy successes ... could leave the region, and the globe, less stable’.⁴¹ Unrealistic expectations and an inability to understand the other side’s priorities are also factors.

While US policy towards the region has evolved since the 1950s, the central strategy has reflected a clear set of priorities. The aim has been to preserve the alliance with Japan, and to contain any inclination on Japan’s part to become regionally assertive (i.e. in ways that might destabilize relationships) or to develop its own nuclear weapons capability. At the same time, the US has encouraged the Japanese to share more of the burden of international peacekeeping and ensuring collective security. It has also sought to deter China from challenging the status quo, while building a partnership with Japan that has enabled more effective management of global issues.

Trump has substituted a set of transactional bilateral relationships for that overall structure. He has also replaced a coherent strategic approach with a set of policies designed to play to his political base rather than to any sense of the national interest or the value of long-term alliances.⁴² Perhaps some of those criticisms could have been directed at President Richard Nixon’s East Asian policy, with the opening to China in 1972 and the accompanying disregard for Japan’s interests. But Nixon’s overture to China was part of a considered geopolitical strategic shift in the context of the Cold War; there is much less sense of Trump’s approach reflecting any similarly considered analysis of where the totality of US interests, in a region of conflicting power bases, might lie.

The assumption that all this is because of an aberrational US presidency is simplistic. Not all of Trump’s policies are the result of his ‘diplomacy of narcissism’⁴³ and the dysfunctionality of the administration. There are broader trends away from the unipolar model that has maintained effective US foreign policy hegemony since the end of the Cold War, and from the assumption that the multilateral system enables rather than constrains US interests. These trends also encompass a widening gulf between the foreign policy elites and the broader electorate. Hillary Clinton had already indicated, before the 2016 presidential election, that she would not ratify the TPP. In his recent book, *Japan in the American Century*, Kenneth B. Pyle argues both that ‘the American Century, with the United States possessing the power and the will to rehabilitate the world ... is coming to an end’ and that the US–Japanese security alliance, ‘under which Japan became a military satellite, a subordinate state’, has run its course.⁴⁴ Asia, writes Pyle, ‘is now a multipolar region with ... all the world’s principal military powers and several of the key middle powers ... the United States, China, Russia, India, Japan, South Korea, Pakistan and North Korea. Six of these eight powers possess nuclear weapons, and the other two are near nuclear.’⁴⁵ Trump may be a symptom of a trend towards unilateralism, rather than the cause itself (just as he has reflected, rather than initiated, a wider global trend towards populism). But, as Pyle argues, ‘[if] America is to lead in this changing order, its strategies must come to terms with an interdependent but non-convergent world.’⁴⁶

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Although some commentators, led by Victor Cha, have developed the theory that a ‘quasi-alliance model’ of relationship has been established between Japan and South Korea, in part because of fears of ‘abandonment’ as well as ‘entrapment’. See Durand, J. (2016), ‘Analysing Japan’s Role in Korean Security within the Framework of the Quasi-Alliance Model’, *International Journal of Korean Studies*, XX(1), doi: 1091–2932 (accessed 27 Jun. 2019).

⁴³ To quote Ambassador William Burns in his appearance at Chatham House, 1 April 2019.

⁴⁴ These quotations come from p. 382 and p. 374 respectively of Pyle, K. (2018), *Japan in the American Century*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge and Massachusetts.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 382.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 385.

The dangers inherent in this developing new world order were made clear in the conference. In the second session, it was argued, as Geun Lee put it, that ‘the multilateral nature of the international order will eventually ensure that domestic unilateralism is ultimately short-lived’. Yet the consensus of the discussion appears to have been that this was a somewhat optimistic conclusion: given the growth of populism, US unpredictability, and the challenge to the hegemony of the elites (in all countries), it was not clear that multilateralism would reassert itself. And although the problem of Brexit is far from the most serious issue facing the leaders of East Asia and the US, it has an impact: insofar as it weakens both Europe and the UK, it presents as much a challenge as an opportunity for East Asian and US foreign policy, if addressed on anything other than the crudest zero-sum terms; at the very least, responding to Brexit requires a rewriting of the assumptions and business plans that have informed engagement with Europe over the past 40 years.

Conclusion

All this places a greater premium on the structures, within East Asian countries, through which leaders can develop policy, be held accountable to their people, and build and maintain cross-border relationships that allow respective national objectives to be promoted and negotiated peacefully – and with as much of a sense of common purpose as the countries can identify. In the case of Japan and China, there has been some evidence over the past year of a greater bias towards *managing* these problems than towards allowing them to *destabilize* the region; and towards finding a way not to allow historical and economic rivalries to tear things apart. There is much less evidence of such a process for Japan and South Korea.

In part, the maintenance of collaborative relations depends on continued economic benefits, equitably disseminated, in order to prevent the populist-driven erosion of essential social and political values, whether democratic or technocratic. But populism is not simply a reflection of economic difficulties, nor is it rooted purely in disaffection towards elites. Managing the tensions in societies that encourage a shift towards movements of this kind requires active political leadership: it means politicians neutralizing populism and, sometimes, where the tools are available to them, using it to try to secure their own ends. It will require continued investment in mechanisms to ensure that multilateral solutions are found to global and regional problems – whether these are economic, financial, security-related or environmental. It will also require investment in bilateral confidence-building measures to ensure that the network of multilateral contacts underpinning policy development is not undermined by tensions between specific actors. It will also involve maintaining, reinforcing and expanding the links between civil society within the region. As long as President Trump occupies the White House, it will be as important for Japan to invest in such activity in Washington as in Beijing and Seoul. We should not assume that the underlying problem will disappear when, in early 2021 or early 2025, Trump eventually gives way to his successor.

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