

LIBERAL STUDIES

Vol. 1, Issue 2, July–December 2016



Scott A. Snyder and Brad Glosserman, *Japan-South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States*, (NY City: Columbia University Press, May 2015), ISBN 978-0-231-17170-0, Pages: 240, Price: \$35.00.

—Rashi Kotak

Master Student, Department of International Relations
School of Liberal Studies
Pandit Deendayal Petroleum University
Gandhinagar, Gujarat

There is no consensus among scholars whether the Asian Century is already dawned. However, the book by Scott A. Snyder and Brad Glosserman asserts that “as the Asian century finally blooms, the promise of the future appears increasingly subject to limits imposed by the past.” Primarily, the authors have underpinned the disturbing role played by indispensable historical legacies in the inter-state relations and alliances in East Asia, specifically between Japan and South Korea. The authors bring to fore the confusion of many “outsiders to understand why two countries that have enjoyed such extraordinary success in the post-war era would dwell on a more distant and ugly past.”

In the context of Japan-South Korea bilateral relations, the historical geopolitical baggage that the authors have brought to fore largely involves war-time atrocities by Imperial Japan, post-War territorial disputes over Dokdo/Takeshima islands, distorted narration and idealisation of Japan’s imperial past in Japanese history books, etc. This baggage constantly overshadows the shared values and beliefs and convergence of interests for sustaining any alliance between the two countries, and also with the U.S.

Apart from highlighting the indispensable role of historical legacies, the authors have dwelt on the theme of perceived incompatible ‘national identities’. While South Korea appears to have imbibed a sense of self-confidence given its overall national growth, Japan, on the other hand, showcases its distinct values of pacifism, egalitarianism, capitalism and globalisation. In the pursuit of understanding “why the differences between Japan and South Korea overshadow their similarities and what those two countries can do, along with

the United States, to overcome them”, the authors have attempted to identify the bottlenecks in the emergence of an Asian century.

The concepts of “national identities” among the Japanese and Koreans – “how the Japanese and Koreans see themselves and their place in the world” – are expounded in the book through extensive public opinion surveys and interviews. Two contrasting trends with respect to Japan-South Korea bilateral relations have been identified in the volume: (1) prevalence of stubborn and glorifying national self-images in both countries; (2) perception of each other through the prism of narrowly conceived identities in contrast to open outlook towards other countries in the same region.

Rightly the authors have identified another notable complexity of Japan-South Korea bilateral relations in the context of their individual relations with the common ally, United States, and the recent American ‘Pivot to Asia’ strategy. The Japanese and South Korean ‘language of alliance’ with the U.S. remains a constant puzzle. The authors say that with the rise of China and the nuclear weapons threat from North Korea, it is imperative for these competing societies to meet the challenge with “a more active U.S. approach.” On the other hand, the U.S. is willing to play balancer role in Asia. The authors expect that institutionalisation of the tri-alliance between South Korea, Japan and USA would emerge basing their argument on several studies especially on economic prosperity, security, and de-politicisation of Japan-South Korea issues.

However, the book suggests that such an alliance cannot be achieved without overcoming inherent challenges. The varying popular sentiments, along with changing political dynamics in each of these countries conditioned by external factors, present a complex situation largely detrimental for any such trilateral cooperation. Also, one can easily identify America’s dilemma in rebalancing Asia for the evolving re-alignment along the China-North Korea, and Japan-India-Australia axis.

Given this scenario, the concluding chapter lists out a few recommendations for “adjusting, adapting and modernising” the trilateral alliance. Most important of them is the suggestion to move from today’s ‘hub-and-spokes alliance’ approach to ‘network approach’ by USA, characterised by increased horizontal cooperation between Japan and South Korea. Moreover, these countries, as the authors categorically mention, “should be working together to tackle shared problems and to protect the national interest – and those of the United States.” They also suggest that both Japan and South Korea must take advantage out of their proximity to USA “to enhance their security and influence in North East Asia and beyond.”

While emphasizing the element of continuity amidst change in their relations, the book has succinctly brought forth wide-ranging opinions and concerns of all stakeholders for stabilising Japan-South Korea relations including expansion of security cooperation among like-minded governments. Also, it provides varied data, governmental and non-governmental, on regional geopolitics, societal sentiments, domestic politics, regional stakeholders, security situation, etc. from all parties' perspectives, which would help policymakers, researchers, and strategic thinkers immensely for foretelling the probable contours of regional dynamics in decades ahead.

