

# Start Making Sense: How Realism Explains Japan-ROK Relations

Written by Zachary Keck

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Start Making Sense: How Realism Explains Japan-ROK Relations

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/05/02/start-making-sense-how-realism-explains-japanese-rok-relations/>

ZACHARY KECK, MAY 2 2012

Over at *Duck of Minerva* (cross-posted on his excellent personal blog), Robert Kelly expresses his frustration at the inability of IR's major paradigms—Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism—to explain the cold and often distant relationship between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Kelly argues that the major strands of thought in each paradigm would forecast a tight alliance forming between these two powers, whether because they face a similar structural environment (Realism), are liberal democracies (Liberalism), or are culturally similar (Constructivism) despite their own claims to the contrary. While I'm not one to dispute the poor explanatory value of Liberalism and Constructivism, I think Professor Kelly's points regarding Realism are worth dwelling upon briefly.

Professor Kelly contends that Realism would predict a tight Japanese-ROK alliance because they have similar threats, mainly the ones emanating from China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea). Yet, Tokyo and Seoul "refuse to do what social science tells them to" by not aligning and in fact remaining somewhat standoffish.

Part of the problem here is that many Neorealist theories are theories of IR; not foreign policy. Waltz's balance-of-power theory is a case in point. First, balance-of-power theory only focuses on the great powers (defined as the poles) in any international system, which Japan and the ROK are not. In any case, Waltz's repeatedly states that his theory will not be able to predict the foreign policies of even the great powers, which he says will depend on unit-level variables that his theory doesn't take into account. When others have contended that Neorealism is suitable as a foreign policy theory, Waltz has been quick to dissuade them of this notion. (Mearsheimer has argued that this qualification is inconsistent with Waltz's claims that the great powers' actions are the main drivers of IR and that balance-of-power theory explains IR. Although I think this criticism overlooks the importance of imitation and socialization in Waltz's theory, this needn't concern us here.)

Some neorealists, of course, do claim their theories can explain foreign policy. Many studies have cast doubt on this proposition, however. As Jeffrey Taliaferro has argued persuasively, Neoclassical Realism (like Schweller who Kelly cites in his post), while underdeveloped, is the most appropriate strand of Realism for explaining foreign policy questions like why the ROK and Japan haven't formed an alliance. Even the best structural Realist theories are likely to be somewhat indeterminate on these questions.

Nonetheless, Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat theory—which Kelly briefly alludes to—is actually quite able to explain the trajectory of ROK-Japanese relations. Walt slightly tweaks his mentor Waltz's by arguing that statesmen balance against the states they view as most threatening, not merely the most powerful ones as in Waltz's theory. According to Walt's theory, statesmen consider four factors when assessing the level of threat another state poses: its aggregate capabilities, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and its leaders' intentions (i.e. aggressive or benevolent).

When applied to the ROK and Japan, balance-of-threat theory would suggest that these states would not have a tight alliance because they differ on which state they view as the greatest threat. Whereas Tokyo views China as its biggest threat, the ROK sees the DPRK as its most dangerous adversary. As Walt's theory would predict, the ROK's

## Start Making Sense: How Realism Explains Japan-ROK Relations

Written by Zachary Keck

threat perception is based primarily on the North's perceived aggressive intentions and geographical proximity (as Professor Kelly has rightly emphasized in the past, that Seoul lies just forty miles from the Demilitarized Zone is never far from the minds of ROK leaders.)

Important implications follow from the differing threat perceptions of Japan and the ROK. First, the ROK has little reason to ally strongly with Japan to balance against the DPRK. To begin with, Tokyo has historically been more of an impediment than an asset to the ROK with regards to the DPRK. During much of the Cold War, the ROK felt Tokyo was too friendly with Pyongyang, as evidenced by the latter using Japanese territory to carry out subversive activities against Seoul including assassination attempts against its leaders. The DPRK's taking of Japanese hostages produced a 180-degree reversal in Tokyo's attitude to the DPRK especially in the last decade. Nonetheless, this hasn't worked in the ROK's favor because Japan has insisted on tying the hostage dispute to the nuclear issue at six-party talks, and has quietly opposed resolving the nuclear issue before progress is made on the hostage crisis.

Furthermore, besides Japan's untested missile defense systems, Tokyo has little to offer the ROK in terms of military capabilities to balance against the DPRK. The ROK can already defeat the DPRK in a conventional war and therefore its main military need is a obtaining a security guarantee from a nuclear-armed state, which Japan isn't.

The U.S. and China are nuclear powers and also have other types of leverage over North Korea.

Kim Il-Sung and his son made no secret of their desire to conclude a peace treaty with the U.S. to formally bring an end to the Korean War. The U.S. is also best positioned to offer positive incentives to the DPRK, whether they are in the form of energy or the lifting of sanctions. On the other hand, as the DPRK's main backer, China has the most influence over the Kim regime even, as Beijing never tires of claiming, that influence is limited.

Thus, even putting aside Japan's colonial history, Walt's theory is able to explain the lack of a strong ROK-Japan bilateral relationship: the ROK is better served by aligning with China over Japan as far as balancing against the DPRK is concerned. Because of this, the ROK is unlikely to form a tight anti-China alliance with Japan. Tokyo almost certainly realizes this and therefore has pursued relations primarily with countries that have interests that mirror its own. This includes the United States and, as China becomes more assertive, countries like India and various ASEAN members.

In reality, however, Japan's colonial history and, until recently, its refusal to apologize for it, have clearly affected the ROK-Japanese relationship. This is in no way incompatible with Walt's balance-of-threat theory, however. As noted above, Walt argues that leaders' perceptions of a state's intentions are important in determining what level of threat they assign it. In making this assessment, it would be foolish to assume the leaders wouldn't take into consideration that the state invaded and brutally occupation their country for thirty-five years in the not-so-distant past. Nor was this a one-time occurrence; empowered by their adoption of Portuguese firearms, Japan invaded and briefly conquered Korea twice in the last decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was the Ming Dynasty in China who came to the rescue both times, albeit only because Korea was a tributary state.

Finally, one academic and one practical point are worth making here. With regards to the former, Walt's perception variable is not at the structural level and thus calls into question whether balance-of-threat theory is actually a structural Realist theory. Second, the vicious intentions the ROK attributes to Japan is merely one factor Seoul considers when weighing the intensity of the different threats it faces. In the past this factor was consistent with other variables such as aggregate capabilities; while China's potential power has always been greater than Japan's, it's only been in recent years that China has actually outmatched Japan in terms of material resources.

As the disparity between China and Japan's material capabilities continues to grow in Beijing's favor, the ROK is likely to place a greater emphasis on the threat China's coercive power potentially poses, while simultaneously becoming less concerned with Japan's colonial past. Thus, depending on the future course of the DPRK, Professor Kelly might get his ROK-Japanese alliance after all.

## Start Making Sense: How Realism Explains Japan-ROK Relations

Written by Zachary Keck

---

**Zachary Keck** is a Deputy Editor of *e-IR*. You can follow him on Twitter @ZacharyKeck. Read more from the *e-IR* editors' blog [here](#).

---

### About the author:

Zachary Keck is assistant editor of *The Diplomat*. He Tweets from @ZacharyKeck and can be contacted through his website.