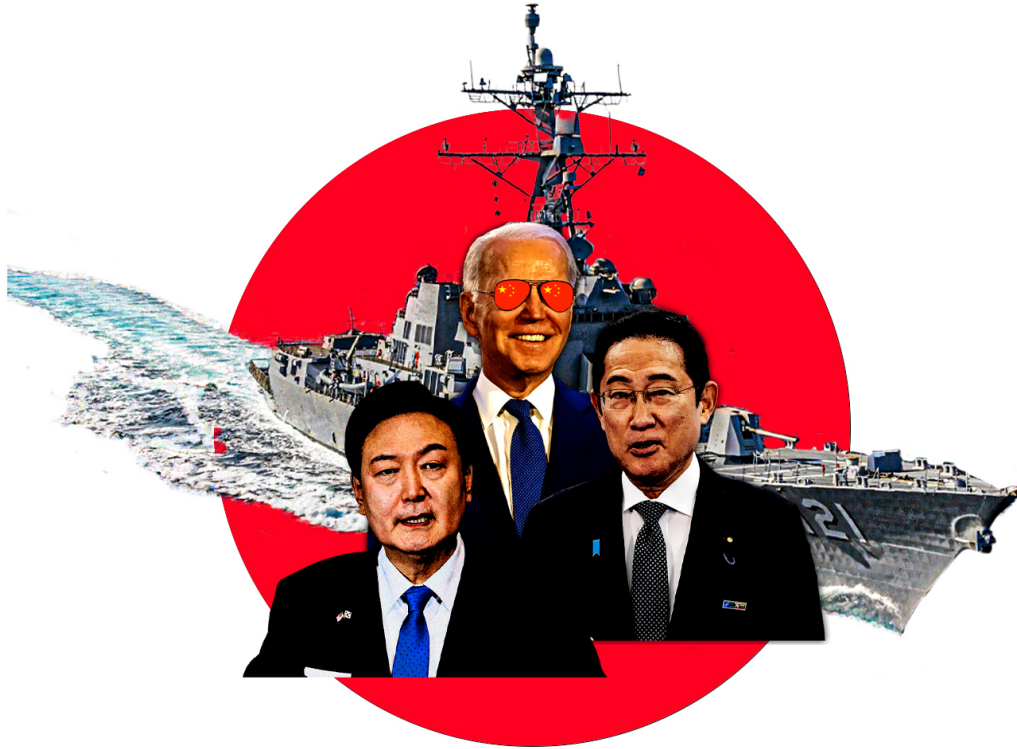


# Can Shared Concerns Help Japan and Korea Mend Fences?

[intpolicydigest.org/the-platform/can-shared-concerns-help-japan-and-korea-mend-fences](https://intpolicydigest.org/the-platform/can-shared-concerns-help-japan-and-korea-mend-fences)

Anuraj Singh



## | THE PLATFORM |

*Photo illustration by John Lyman*

**While Japan and South Korea have legitimate grievances, they also have shared concerns that should help them reconcile.**

Diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan have long been complicated by a tapestry of historical grievances, territorial disputes, and political challenges. These contentious issues have routinely hindered bilateral cooperation and stymied progress on shared objectives. However, amidst these obstacles, there are promising avenues for peace and improved relations, particularly in the realms of strategic communication and trust-building.

Both nations need to contribute towards mending their diplomatic ties. This necessitates an openness to dialogue, a willingness to address longstanding resentments and a shared commitment to finding common ground based on mutual values and respect. The United States emerges as a shared ally for both Japan and South Korea. Their collective response to China's escalating regional dominance, a manifestation of President Xi Jinping's assertive foreign policy strategies—including support for North Korea and 'wolf warrior' diplomacy—has fostered an environment conducive to discussions between Japan and South Korea.

While these geopolitical shifts facilitate reconciliation, they are not guaranteed. Rather, they serve as baby steps towards peace, laying the foundation for stronger engagement and a coordinated response to shared regional challenges. As recently as 2018, legal disputes over human rights violations exacerbated domestic tensions between the two nations.

Joint military drills offer an intriguing platform for fostering improved South Korea-Japan diplomatic ties, acting as a tangible tool to facilitate mutual understanding, inspire collaboration, and pave the path to reconciliation. Though they cannot resolve all underlying issues, these exercises could serve as a catalyst for a more comprehensive reconciliation process. Joint naval exercises between the U.S. and Vietnam, initiated in the 1990s, serves as an illustrative success story. These sessions not only bolstered diplomatic ties between the United States and Vietnam, but also nurtured trust and collaboration, enhanced maritime safety, and allowed for an exchange of expertise.

By participating in joint military exercises, South Korea and Japan have the opportunity to rebuild trust, generate momentum, and foster an environment conducive to discussing more sensitive issues. These exercises represent a visible commitment to regional stability and security and can serve as a springboard for trust and collaboration between the two nations.

The significance of military exercises in international relations cannot be overstated. They provide a platform for strategic communication, allowing participating nations to share knowledge, coordinate actions, and align objectives. By engaging in combined military exercises, South Korea and Japan can create efficient communication channels, bolstering mutual understanding and reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings or miscalculations.

Furthermore, these exercises serve as confidence-building measures, demonstrating a commitment to transparency, peaceful intentions, and the maintenance of regional security. Through joint military exercises, South Korea and Japan can bolster their mutual trust while signaling to the global community their commitment to cooperation.

A critical aspect of these exercises is the enhancement of interoperability among the armed forces of participating nations. By collaborating, South Korea and Japan can strengthen their defense cooperation, develop military-to-military relations, and enhance

combined operational capabilities. This interoperability not only strengthens bilateral ties but also contributes to the overall security and stability of the region.

Recent joint exercises in the East China Sea, involving Japan, South Korea, and the United States, demonstrate how such drills can expand military connections, bolster deterrence capabilities, and improve overall regional preparedness.

Joint military exercises present a promising strategy to foster cooperation, build trust, and pave the way toward peace between South Korea and Japan. Despite not being panaceas for all underlying issues, these drills are vital tools in diplomatic relations, promoting strategic communication, confidence-building, and interoperability.

However, joint military exercises have not been immune to criticism by South Koreans. Critics primarily fear that joint drills could compromise South Korea's autonomy or reignite old tensions. There are concerns that South Korea's alignment with the U.S.-Japan alliance might entangle it in broader regional security dynamics and jeopardize its strategic autonomy. Joint drills are sometimes seen as a painful reminder of the historical legacy of Japan's colonial authority over South Korea.

To mitigate these concerns and navigate criticism, South Korea and Japan must commit to transparent communication and clarify the nature and objectives of their cooperative endeavors. By providing clear information about the drills' aims—including enhancing regional stability, countering shared threats, and fostering interoperability—misconceptions can be reduced.

Moreover, both nations should engage their civil society and the public in discussions surrounding joint military exercises. Through open information dissemination, public diplomacy projects, and candid conversations, a greater understanding of the benefits and objectives of these drills can be fostered. This outreach can help increase public support and dispel myths rooted in historical sensitivities or concerns about foreign influence.

Additionally, initiatives to redress past wrongs should accompany joint exercises. It's important to acknowledge the complexities of the past and demonstrate a commitment to reconciliation. This should be supplemented with diplomatic, educational, and cultural initiatives that foster understanding and repair.

In response to public concerns and criticism, both South Korea and Japan must continually evaluate and refine the framework for joint military exercises. This involves considering feedback, minimizing potential adverse effects on local communities or the environment, and ensuring the drills are conducted with accountability, transparency, and respect for both nations' sovereignty.

By proactively addressing objections, fostering transparency, and facilitating open discussions, South Korea and Japan can assuage concerns about joint military exercises and create a more supportive atmosphere for their cooperative endeavors. In doing so,

they can leverage these exercises as effective tools for promoting peace, regional security, and intergroup trust.

The tangled web of historical animosities, territorial disputes, and political challenges has long tarnished relations between South Korea and Japan. Yet, promising avenues toward peace and improved ties exist, particularly through strategic communication and trust-building initiatives such as joint military exercises. By harnessing the potential of these initiatives and addressing lingering concerns, South Korea and Japan can build a future marked by regional stability, cooperation, and prosperity.

Anuraj Singh is studying Political Science and Government at the Jindal School of International Affairs. His interests include policy and law, with a focus on democratic governance.