Short Paper 2 (Theory):

The Politics of War Memory in East Asia and its Impact on Economic Security Policy

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I R 749: Asia and the World System

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April 6, 2025

The Tangible Power of Symbolic Gestures

From 2001 to 2006, former Prime Minister of Japan Junichiro Koizumi paid an annual visit to Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine to honor Japan's war dead—including fourteen "Class-A war criminals from World War II."[1] To Chinese and South Korean leaders, Koizumi's repeated visits proved "that Tokyo has yet to atone for a war of aggression that left millions dead across Asia."[2] The memory of Japan's role in World War II (WWII) is a potent political force in East Asia, specifically in mainland China and the Korean peninsula, where the wounds suffered by the victims of Imperial Japan's aggression have not yet healed. Beyond being a powerful social force, this memory has profound political implications for interstate dialogue, as "top-level diplomacy" between China and Japan "was virtually paralyzed due to Beijing's protest at Koizumi's annual visits" from 2001 to 2006. Due to its potential to exacerbate high-level tensions, the issue of war memory is often examined through the lens of politics. This paper seeks to build on that understanding by emphasizing the economic impact of this issue and synthesizing the issues of economic security and war memory. Increasingly characterized by dual-use technologies with both commercial and military applications, the 21st-century economy has guided states to focus on national security when structuring trade policy. Realist examinations of this phenomenon focus on China as the ascendant power in East Asia that secondary powers balance against, but war memory offers a constructivist lens through which to understand phenomena unexplained by realist conceptions of security, Japan and South Korea's tense relationship on semiconductor manufacturing being a prime example.

The Memory of WWII and its Effect on Contemporary East Asian Politics

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[1] Yinan He, "Ripe for Cooperation or Rivalry? Commerce, Realpolitik, and War Memory in Contemporary Sino-Japanese Relations," *Asian Security* 4, no. 2 (2008): 163. https://doi.org/10.1080/14799850802006522

[2] Justin McCurry, "Koizumi Ignores Protests in Final Shrine Visit," *The Guardian*, August 16, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/aug/16/secondworldwar.japan.

Economically, China, South Korea, and Japan trade a high volume of goods with one another. Politically, Japan's relationship with both China and South Korea is tenuous due to its wartime past. In 2008, political scientist Yinan He characterized the elite Japanese view on this divide as that "the economic and political aspects of the [Japan-China] relationship were mutually isolated"—the *seirei-keinetsu* or "cold-politics-hot-economy" paradox[3]. She writes that Chinese elites were more split on the issue, some taking a similar view to Japanese elites and some maintaining that economics and politics were inseparably linked. He's article was written when the Japanese economy was larger than the Chinese economy, and when the relationship between China and Japan was more fraught due to Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine having taken place recently—thus, it focused mostly on the precarious relationship through the lens of power transition theory as China was poised to overtake Japan economically. In 2025, the relationship between China and Japan is still tense, but the regional power transition took place without any conflict as the dynamic between the two shifted and China became undeniably stronger—economically and militarily—than Japan (not accounting for Japan's more robust alliances). In large part, the political tension between the two countries is still due to Japan's history during WWII, though other explanations such as regime type differences still apply.

The historical divide between the commercial and political realms is also observable between Japan and South Korea, who engage in a high volume of trade with each other as do Japan and China. Similar to the China-Japan political relationship, the South Korea-Japan relationship is also characterized by a high degree of animosity related to Japan's imperial past. American political scientist Paul Midford argued in 2008 that despite South Korea and China's regime type differences, South Korea viewed Japan as a greater threat than China, stating that there is "overwhelming evidence that Korean public opinion sees Japan as a threat, and many

[3] He, "Ripe for Cooperation or Rivalry?", 165.

view Japan as the leading threat … few South Koreans see China as a threat and most see China as essentially benign"[4]. While South Korean attitudes toward China have soured since Midford's analysis—as of 2022, according to a survey published by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 81% of South Koreans view China negatively, Midford's point remains salient as it pertains to Japan—anti-Japanese sentiment remains a potent political force in South Korea, as Japan is still viewed negatively by 62% of South Koreans[5].

The *seirei-keinetsu* paradox has always been subject to debate, as He articulated in 2008, but as high-tech commercial activity—specifically, the manufacturing of dual-use technologies like semiconductors—has increased in East Asia, it has become increasingly difficult to unlink trade from political relationships as the transfer of these technologies has become an issue of national security. Realist theory suggests the secondary economic powers in the region—Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan—would counterbalance against an authoritarian China as they are all democracies. This may be true, but the history of imperial Japan in East Asia also has an important impact on how these three secondary actors interact on the issue of economic security and how they balance against each other even with a powerful China in mind.

Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Semiconductors

Taiwan and Japan have an amicable relationship and collaborate closely on dual-use technologies, specifically semiconductors. Professor Seungjoo Lee of Seoul's Chung-Ang University notes when analyzing the Japan-South Korea-Taiwan dynamic that "the trilateral relationship facilitated the strengthening of supply chain cooperation between Japan and

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[4] Paul Midford, "Challenging the Democratic Peace? Historical Memory and the Security Relationship between Japan and South Korea," *Pacific Focus* 23, no. 2 (August 2008): 203. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1976-5118.2008.00010.x.

[5] Richard Q. Turcsányi et al., "South Korean Public Opinion on the World in Times of Global Turmoil: US Yay, China Nay, Japan Meh," Central European Institute of Asian Studies, September 2022, https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Korean-poll-finaldraft-adjustments-3-1_rqt-1-2.pdf.

Taiwan"[6] while South Korea competed with Taiwan and clashed with Japan. Although Taiwan was colonized by Japan beginning in the late 19th century, most Taiwanese have a much more favorable opinion of Japan than mainland Chinese and South Koreans do. It is important to note that this difference in Taiwanese perceptions of Japan highlights that Japan's colonial past is not a phenomenon felt uniformly by every country it colonized and that war memory is not a catch-all concept but instead context-dependent. Japan's *The Asahi Shimbun* reported that a January 2022 survey of Taiwanese citizens by the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association's Taipei office found that when asked "which country or region they like the most, Japan was chosen by a record 60 percent of respondents."[7] The closeness of Taiwan and Japan may offer one explanation for their easy collaboration on dual-use technologies—they trust each other, which is not the case for Japan and South Korea. Lee highlights the material impact of history on economic collaboration, noting that "in August 2019, amid ongoing disagreements over the resolution of past historical issues, the Japanese government sought aggressive techno-economic statecraft to remove Korea from the white list [of nations with minimal trade restrictions]."[8] Trust is a key component of economic security—realism posits that in the East Asian case, China's rise and regime type difference will cause both Japan and South Korea to counterbalance against it, which does explain one piece of the puzzle, but war memory offers an equally compelling psychological explanation for why these secondary players with identical regime types—Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea—decide to collaborate on dual-use technologies or not as they attempt to shape policy around an ascendant China. Specifically, the difference in the

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[6] Seungjoo Lee, "U.S.-China Technology Competition and the Emergence of Techno-Economic Statecraft in East Asia: High Technology and Economic-Security Nexus," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 29 (2024): 410. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-023-09878-8.
[7] Koichiro Ishida, "Survey: Taiwan's Fondness for Japan Reaches Record High," *The Asahi Shimbun*, April 2022, https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14590050.
[8] Lee, "U.S.-China Technology Competition", 410.

Taiwanese and Korean perceptions of Japan explains one reason why Japan works more closely with Taiwan on semiconductors than it does with South Korea.

Of course, there are other explanations for Japan and Taiwan's close collaboration as well—Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company Limited (TSMC) produces a much larger volume of the world's most advanced semiconductors than does South Korea's Samsung, meaning from a material standpoint collaborating with Taiwan on semiconductors is more practical than South Korea. This being the case still does not explain why Japan cannot work closely with both, but introducing the variable of war memory between Japan and South Korea explains the mutual apprehension towards collaboration on economic security.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the complex dynamics between Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea on semiconductor manufacturing suggests that economic security in East Asia is not an issue that can be approached solely through the lens of realism. That is not to say that realist theory is wrong—the pressure to counterbalance against a rising China is certainly one of the key factors in the three actors' policy decision-making. By highlighting the role of war memory in East Asian politics, certain behaviors among the secondary states that are not explained by realist theory become more understandable, as in the example of Japan and South Korea's apprehension toward working together closely on dual-use technologies.

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