

Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism in Asia: The United States, Japan, and Korea

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Abstract

For decades, area specialists have argued that international relations (IR) theory cannot adequately explain security dynamics in East Asia as a result of cultures, histories, and traditions distinct from the West. A shining anomaly put forth in this regard is the relationship between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Why have these two powers had such volatile relations, despite their élite ties, economic complementarities, and shared security adversaries throughout the Cold War and Post-Cold War eras? Area scholars point to historical antagonism as the primary explanatory variable; however, this at best explains only part of the picture (i.e., the friction but not the cooperation). Balance of threat theorists might explain Japan–Korea volatility as a function of changes in the level of external threat; however, variations in threats posed to the two powers do not correlate well with outcomes in bilateral interaction. Developing the concept of *quasi-alliances* (two states that remain non-allied but share a third power as a common ally), this article argues that Japanese and Korean perceptions of their common great power patron's security commitment (the United States) directly affects the level of political–military cooperation between the two quasi-allied states. Fears of U.S. abandonment determine when and under what conditions historical anger most affects the tenor of relations. The level of patron commitment is also a better determinant of alliance behavior than the level of external threat. Framing the relationship in this manner, I attempt to acknowledge area scholars' concerns about the critical role of history and culture, but consider history's salience in the context of equally critical but acultural security ties that underlie the two states' triangular relations with the United States. For alliance theory, this East Asian case shows how alignment choices are not a direct function of external threat but threats as refracted through perceptions of patron commitment. In security relationships with high degrees of asymmetrical dependence, patron promises matter more than adversarial threats because promises can mitigate threats, leading to behavior not predicted by balance of threat theory. Moreover, in extreme cases,

promises (or lack thereof) can affect alliance behavior irrespective of variations in the objective level of external threat.

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