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The past haunts the space between Seoul and Tokyo. But alliances? They move to the rhythm of interests, not memory. If the United States wants Japan and South Korea to grow as military partners, diplomacy offers the most promise. The economic instrument, while relevant, holds the least direct leverage.

Diplomacy is about relationships, credibility, and trust, which provide the best shot at aligning Japan and South Korea. Trade and intelligence sharing will not erode bitterness on their own. Rather, consistent leadership will steadily create momentum. Diplomacy, as Professor John Cloud stated, should always be the “first thing we do” and not an option of last resort (Cloud, 2023). The Joint Doctrine Note 1-19 on the competition continuum echoes these claims and suggests that successful competition is predicated upon engagement that fosters cooperation (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2019, p. 7). Therefore, diplomacy is the enabler of the other instruments of national power. It is not in competition with economic or informational initiatives. It coordinates them. Once the objectives are in place, diplomacy paves the way for trade incentives and messaging. For example, the Congressional Research Service (2023a) described trilateral engagements where the United States emphasized the institutionalization of cooperation (p. 2). Japan has supported this approach as well and it perceives relations with Seoul as integral to

stability (Congressional Research Service, 2023b, p. 1). Real progress and opportunity will come from sustained diplomatic efforts.

In this context, economic instruments are a hammer searching for a screw. Japan and South Korea already have substantial trade between them, but it has not led to stronger military alignment. Grievances still remain. Sanctions or incentives are simply too blunt an instrument with which to undo history or create trust. Alden (2021) warned that managed trade used as leverage can backfire. South Korea's own history of economic retaliation illustrates the tenuous nature of this tool (Congressional Research Service, 2023a, p. 2).

Information has more potential than economics, but it struggles without action. Mullen (2009) argued that strategic communication only works when paired with policy (p. 2). Messages without substance fade. Diplomacy without substance fails too. But diplomacy backed by effort can last.

Ultimately, diplomacy represents the most reliable method to resolve conflicts and establish trust between nations. Economic tools are too coarse. Information alone is not enough. The United States needs to establish diplomatic leadership while maintaining its current direction.

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