

## Korea-China-Japan: The Possible Trinity

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper considers the long time desire for realization of Korea-China-Japan (KCJ) trilateral cooperation as a possible process if the respective countries opt for togetherness strategy in healing historical scars, solving territorial conflicts and maintaining peace and security. The KCJ is advised to initiate a Four Party Talks which include a separated North Korea as an important part in the region stability. South Korea is specifically advised to play a middle strategy role and stop accelerating problems by advertising sensitive issues like Dokdo but rather call for a Korea-Japan dialogue or mediator to resolve the matter.*

**Keywords:** KCJ, Togetherness strategy, Four Party Talks, Negotiations

### INTRODUCTION

For long time Korea, China and Japan (KCJ) were distinguished from most other major trading nations by their nonparticipation in regional economic arrangements (Scott and Ben, 2001). However in 1999, an agreement was reached for heads of state from each of the three countries when they met in the sidelines of the ASEAN+3 Summit. In 2008 the KCJ formally separated itself from the Asian plus Three (APT) process and formed North East Asia Trilateral Summit (NEATS). Since then KCJ countries have been trying to work for the realization of trilateral economic cooperation, but existing complicated obstacles continue to hinder the substantial efforts already in place.

### OBJECTIVES

This paper aims at analyzing the Northeast situation by digging down the generic root causes hindering cooperation processes in Northeast Asia and proposing the action plan model towards realization of the dynamic and sustainable KCJ trilateral organization. While other literatures denied the possibility of trilateral economic cooperation, this study focuses on the possibility of the trinity to happen.

### RATIONALE AND FACTS

The KCJ bloc is an important part of the Asian and world economic and social developments. This is because China, Japan and South Korea are among top 20 largest economies in the world. Any potential changes or instability in the region may result to a much greater impact in the region and World at large. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of KCJ countries is expected to reach 23US\$ trillion in the year 2019 which will be the top and leading against 28 European Union countries (EU28) and USA. Its contribution to the World GDP will also be highest at about 23%. Its contribution to the World merchandise export will reach 21.4% in 2019 as second top after EU28 (32.8%) and USA at third place with 8.4%. More details are found in diagrams 3-1 to 3-5 at the appendix.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Mugomba (1978) studied what went wrong until the first East African Community (EAC) collapsed in 1977 only a decade after it came into formal existence. The study looked at the impact of ideology on inter-African alignments and concluded that ideology, regional conflict, and systemic external penetration were the critical factors contributed to the collapse of EAC. However, the EAC re-established again and entered into force in 2000. The study has succeeded to reveal actual reasons to the fallen community. However some ideological standing like Max's and other rivalries are perhaps do not have much effect in today's World otherwise they still stand as important lessons not to happen again when the KCJ trinity realizes.

Meroira and Mendoza (2008) studied how the size ideology affected the first collapsed Caribbean Community (CARICOM). There was an economic understanding that minimal size countries or governments could not be economically viable. It was a skeptical view of the benefits of regional integration, which led to the collapse of the federation in 1962. What happened to past Caribbean community will not happen KCJ since all countries are very economically viable despite the fact that China's area size is 20 times the size of Korea and Japan altogether. There may exist a feeling of greatness but will not have potential effect to the KCJ trinity.

Germany confederation was formed in 1815 and comprised of 39 Germany states. The confederation collapsed in 1866. Lee (1985) pointed out the reasons for dissolution as being weak, ineffective and much more surrounded by nationalist aspirations. Other factors were rivalry between Prussia and Austria; warfare; 1848 revolution and inability of the multiple members to compromise. Effectiveness for all partners is very crucial for the life of the cooperation. This idea poses challenge for a mechanism or framework as to how the future of KCJ trinity can be coordinated for sustainability.

Linn (2004) re-visited the collapse of Soviet Union and finally argued that, the disintegration of economic space has been a major factor explaining the economic collapse of the transition countries in Europe and Central Asia. It is very unfortunate there are fewer studies about collapse of different co-operations as a result of economic breakdown than collapse driven by social and political breakdowns, therefore Linn's study succeeded to show the need for strong economic setup for the expected KCJ trinity even though the three nations are already economically giants.

Srinivasa (2013) studied about China-Japan-Korea Free Trade Agreement (CJK FTA) will be of the benefit if concluded, however, there are obstacles which make the completion of a CJK FTA, or even bilateral FTAs between Japan and China or between Japan and Korea extremely difficult. Srinivasa suggested for a dual-track approach in which China and Korea can fast-track the completion of a bilateral FTA between them and the three countries continue their negotiations for a trilateral FTA on a steady track. Even though Japan is perceived as a difficult partner, China and Korea cannot continue as two partners for the sake of building the future trinity. Always problems arise when fast tracking important matters. Already some South Koreans themselves are worrying about a Korea-China long-stalled free trade agreement (FTA) deal signed very recently on Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> November, 2014. Lee (2014) considered it as a hasty trade deal.

Scott and Ben (2001) pointed out several obstacles hindering Northeast Asian cooperation including political and ideological barriers that separated China from its neighbors; continuing military tensions between North and South Korea; lingering anti-Japanese

sentiment in both Korea and China from the occupation in the first half of the 20th century; Chinese communist regime against western and Chinese support for the North Korean regime. They finally recommended for a “bottom up” approach to regional economic integration, starting first with the acceleration of domestic economic reforms. This was and still be a good suggestion, however there are already made good efforts which cannot be easily abandoned rather harmonizing and accommodating them in the future KCJ trinity.

Pieczara (2012) urged that the “Trilateral Cooperation” (TC) among Japan, South Korea, and China, initiated within Asian Pacific Trade Agreement (APT) in 1999 and established independently from it in 2008, was a surprise in Asian regionalism. Pieczara further suggested that; if there is a passed decision that APT is the most important, whole knowledge will collapse if TC is welcomed on the Asian soil. It can be considered as ‘crack’ in APT. Pieczara’s argument posed the idea of thinking twice when trying to build KCJ trinity as many other partners like ASEAN countries may be affected or affecting trilateral decisions in the future because these three countries are among key economic players in the Asian region.

Chakravorty (2013) urged that, territorial disputes between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea and between Japan and South Korea over the Takeshima/Dokdo islands in the Sea of Japan fuel problems about peace and security in the region. Furthermore, bilateral relationships are also hindered by historical baggage, emotions and strong nationalist fervour. Since historical scars are not yet healed, Chakravorty’s study calls for an important approach and specific mechanisms as were not proposed.

Singh (2012) viewed North East Asia as a geopolitically unstable. Singh pointed reasons to be varying economies, different forms of governance, aspirations of nations and the presence of extra regional powers operating in the area which further compounding the stability factor. Other reasons are differences on land and at sea result to conflicts which always affect stability in their respective regions. This is in line with Tanaka (2012) who pointed out that Takeshima dispute; reconciling history and comfort women issue and Japan-Korea perception gap as potential threats to the two countries efforts to cooperate. Tanaka suggested for the bilateral relationship to be reframed in such a way that shared interests and cooperation, not history and territorial disputes, take special attention. Both countries need to recalibrate and emphasize the importance of Japan–South Korea cooperation, not only for the sake of the two countries themselves but also for the region as a whole. Tanaka’s arguments are viable and this study will therefore propose actions and steps towards realization of true trinity.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS**

After the detailed reviews; generic cooperation problems and specific problems will be taken care while proposing the action framework. Generic problems derived from the experience of other co-operations, integrations or coalitions once existed and collapsed. Studying and linking with the expected KCJ trinity is very vital for the future life of the trilateral cooperation. Generally rivalry, ineffectiveness, economic problems, external forces, political conflicts and regional ideology happened to be the critical reasons for the collapse of past integration. Specific region problems were derived from within KCJ areas. Generally historical conflicts, peace and security especially of the Korea peninsula are the critical problems hindering the progress and realization of true cooperation among the countries. This study therefore propose the below figure 1 actions and level of priority to be taken for the realization of the KCJ trinity.

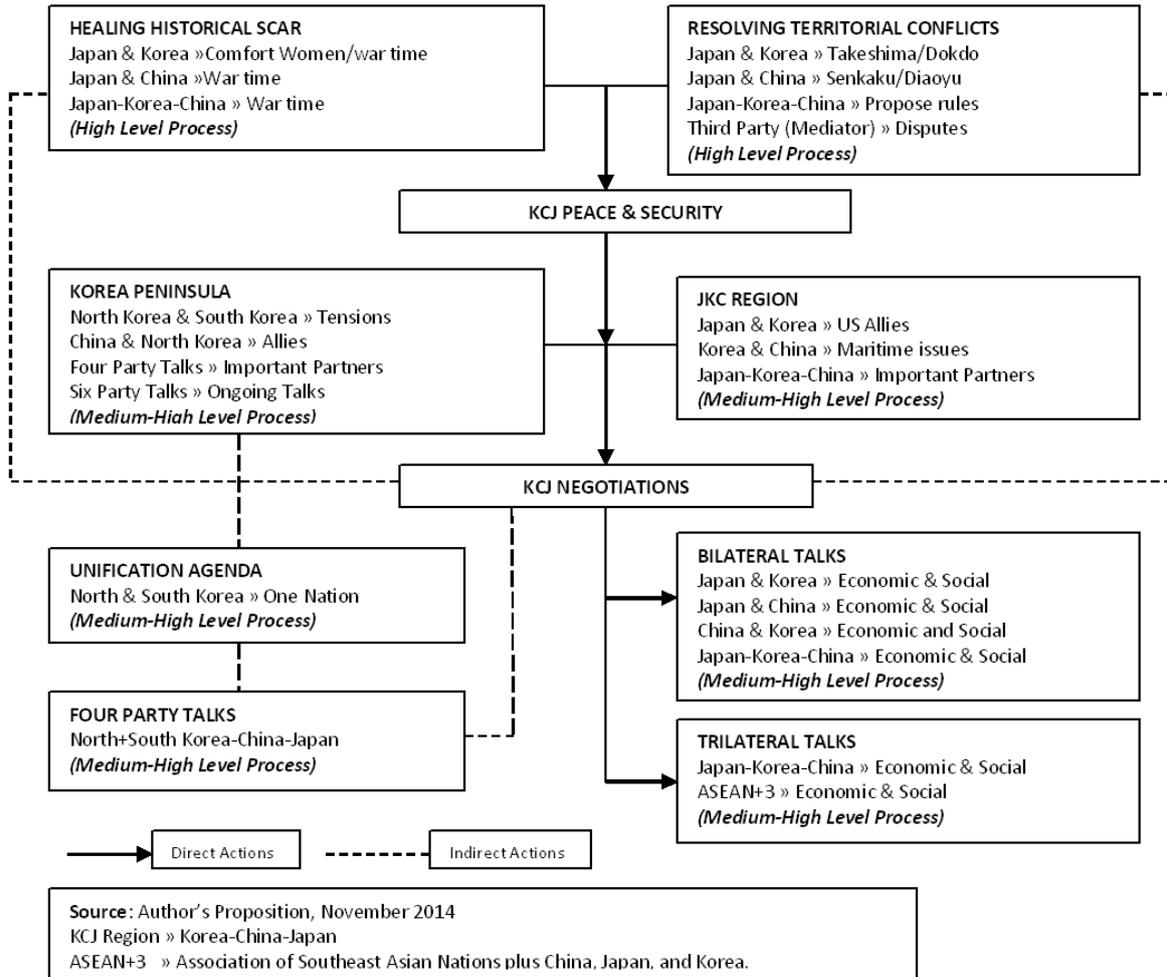


Figure 1. Proposed Togetherness Strategy

### Healing Scars and Resolving Conflicts

Effects of historical conflicts among Japan, Korea and China are vivid as results of past wars and colonial regimes. These conflicts should be resolved to heal scars and open up willingness for all members to discuss further steps of the trilateral cooperation. In addition to two countries talks, all three countries should come together for discussion and resolutions. This study proposes for a high level process<sup>1</sup> where heads of individual states initiate and resolve dialogues. This is because past experience confirms effectiveness of their statements and readiness of their actions as vital to changes. Even though Korea-China-Japan annual trilateral summit poses similar view, it is directly affected by the unresolved issues.

All KCJ countries are currently experiencing territorial conflicts especially the famous conflicts of Takeshima/Dokdo and Senkaku/Diaoyu. It is very difficult to seek the KCJ within-within resolution as all countries faced high escalated problems including military trials. There is a need to seek external forces or mediators to act upon the matter. Individual country like Korea may initiate the process and invite other opponent instead of working hard in re-writing the history and advertising the problems.

<sup>1</sup> Dialogues to be attended by KCJ heads of states only

## **Peace and Security**

This is the most important part to be maintained because all countries have been periodically entered into quarrel. The Korea Peninsula instability and political tensions have been fueling problems. In addition to ongoing Six Party Talks (SPT)<sup>2</sup> of Korean Peninsula, this study proposes the initiation of Four Party Talks (FPT)<sup>3</sup> which will be effective and beneficial for the realization of the strong Trilateral Cooperation (TC) because all members will be sharing common views in the future. In the same togetherness framework, North Korea should not be left out in these dialogues. China and North Korea are highly important partners in this part because they have similar ideological backgrounds and have been working together for long time.

Like in healing historical scars, heads of individual states should initiate FPT. They can use SPT as a starting point however the presence of other two countries (Russia and USA) in the SPT poses another challenge and fear of failure. In line with other peace and security talks, unification agenda of two Koreans is very important for the future sustainable trilateral cooperation and realization. The KCJ countries should join indirectly to discuss and support the unification agenda. Since this stage is proposed to be of medium-high level process<sup>4</sup>, it may be taken care by existing KCJ Foreign Ministers Summit.

## **Negotiations**

Negotiations and dialogues should be the center and heart of all activities towards the realization of true and sustainable JKC trilateral cooperation. Apart from direct ongoing bilateral negotiations taking place in the region, indirect negotiations which connects North Korea should also conducted at the same time. North Korea is the most separated nation in the World and continuing separating the country will result to uncertain future of the trilateral cooperation. Inclusion of North Korea in some social and economic negotiations will probably result to a smooth Korea Unification. Since there is ASEAN plus Three (APT), KCJ can continue on utilizing the forum even though it may pose challenge and ASEAN future uncertainties. Therefore KCJ may invite and include ASEAN countries in negotiations where possible.

## **CONCLUSION**

Korea-China-Japan (JKC) will be possible and sustainable trinity if and only if the historical scars and territorial conflicts will be collectively resolved by dialogues and calls for mediators where possible. Individual countries' political willingness and support are important starters for the rest of the work to be done. This is also in line with ideas of Irina and Azhdah (2003) who pointed that territorial problems are often the main cause of friction and conflicts between states. But could be resolved efficiently and quickly enough if the leaders of the states engaged in the disputes manifested the necessary political will. Maintaining region peace and security; negotiation inclusion of separated North Korea are added factors to a possible KCJ trinity. Apart from togetherness framework, Figure 2 below summarizes the suggested immediate actions for Korea specifically.

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<sup>2</sup> Launched in 2003, the Six Party Talks are aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear program through negotiations involving China, the United States, North and South Korea, Japan, and Russia.

<sup>3</sup> Proposed Four Party Talks aim at bringing together China, Japan, North and South Korea for the sake of ending Korean Peninsula conflicts and tensions.

<sup>4</sup> Dialogues to be attended by KCJ ministers or heads of states

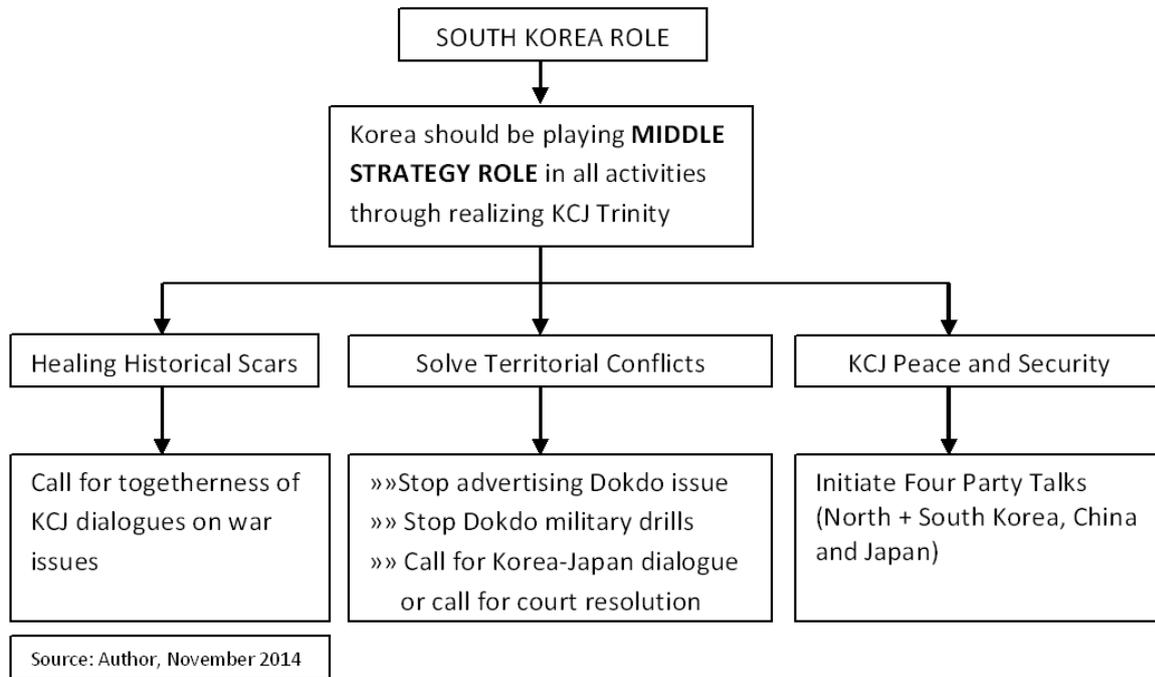


Figure 2. Summary of Immediate Korean Actions

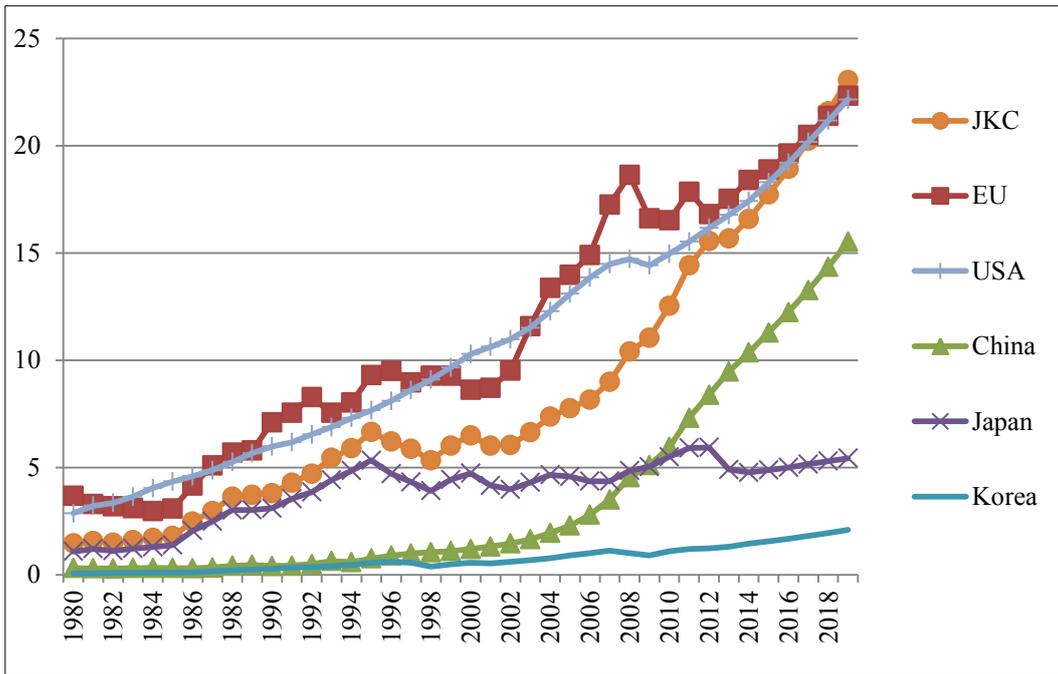
### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study acknowledges the support of Dong-A University Sabbatical Research Work

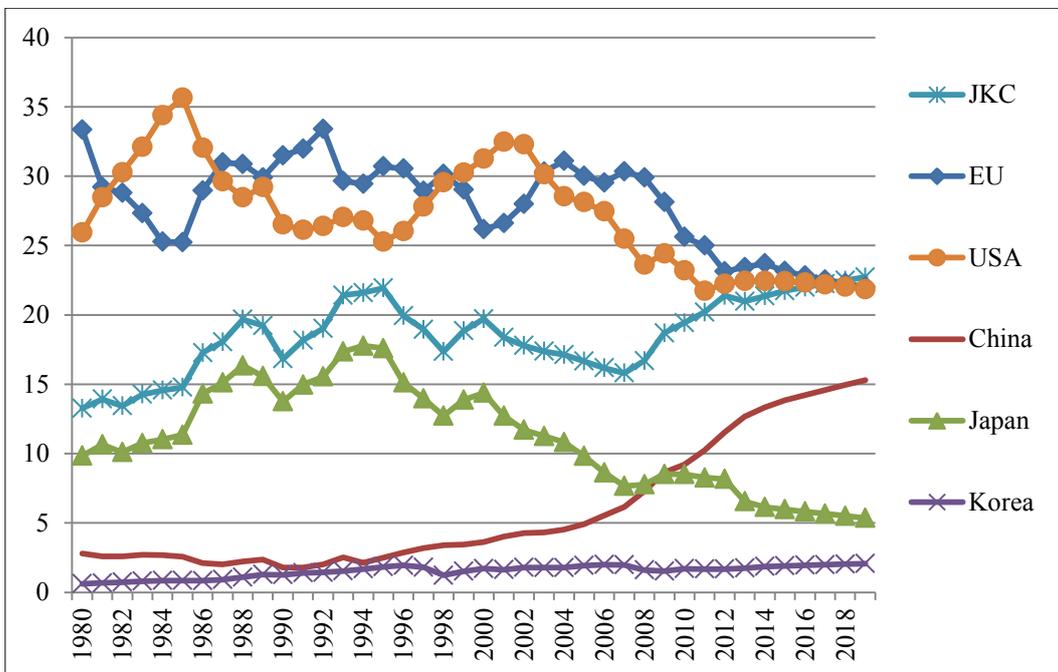
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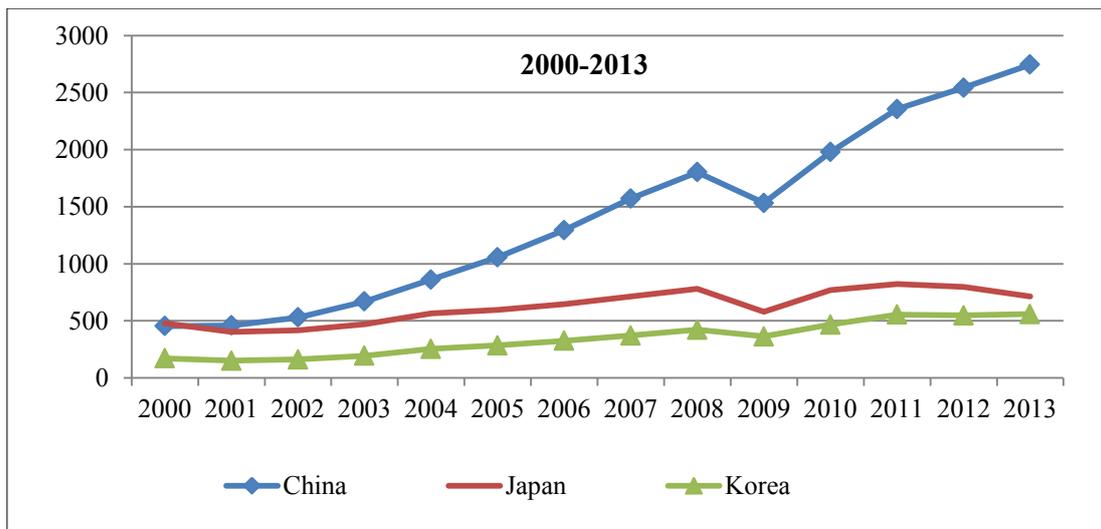
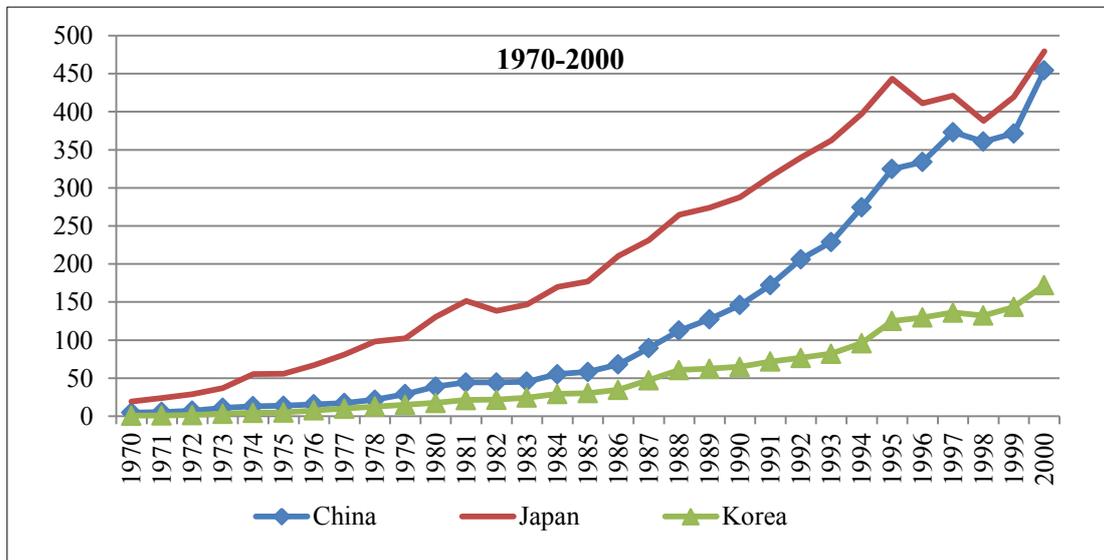
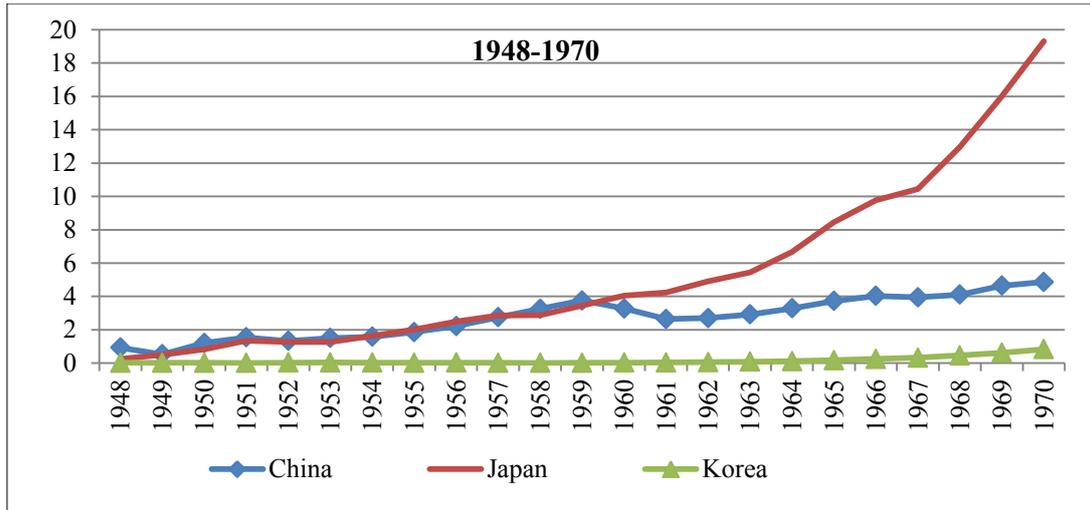
APPENDIX



Source: Author using IMF, World Economic Outlook Database of October 2014  
 Diagram 3-1: Gross domestic product, current prices (USD trillion) 1980-2019

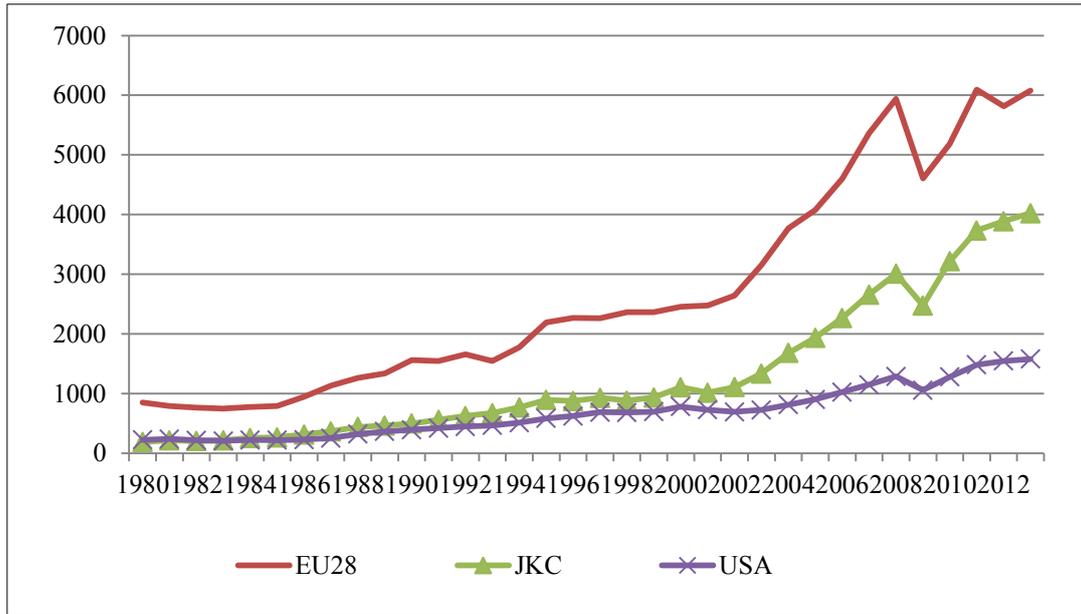


Source: Author using IMF, World Economic Outlook Database of October 2014  
 Diagram 3-2: Contribution to World GDP, current prices (%) 1980-2019



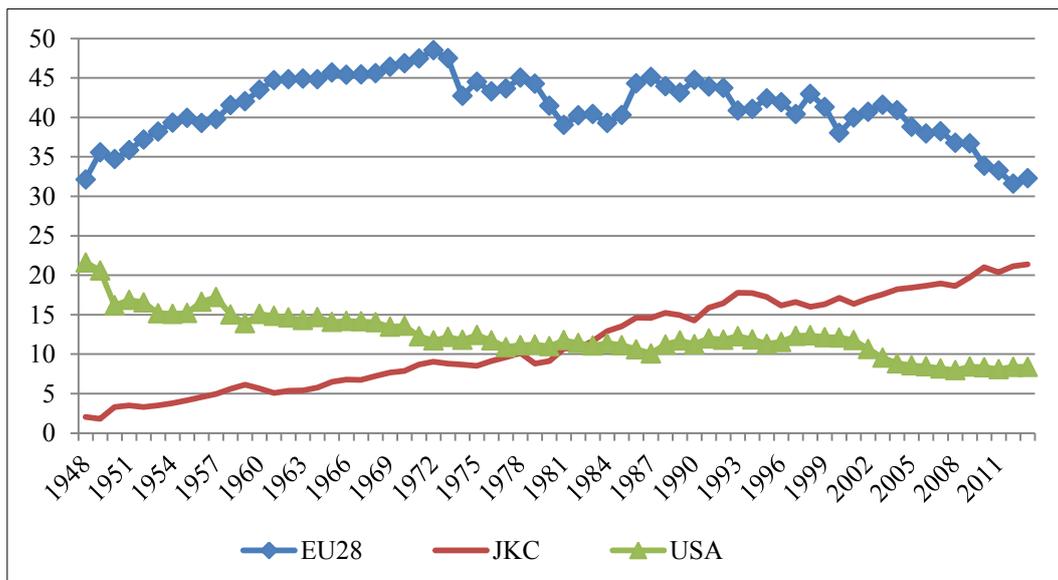
Source: Author using UNCTAD data November, 2014

Diagram 3-3\_combined: Historical Periods of Merchandise Export (US\$ Billions)



Source: Author using UNCTAD data November, 2014

Diagram 3-4: Historical Value of Merchandise Export (USD Billion) 1980-2013



Source: Author using UNCTAD data November, 2014

Diagram 3-5: Contributions to World Merchandise Export (%) 1948-2012