Early relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) were critically shaped by three decisive events: diplomatic normalisation in 1965, the 1973 abduction of opposition politician Kim Dae-jung from Japan and the attempted assassination of President Park Chung-hee in 1974. These events have remained controversial, not least because much of the detailed information surrounding them has been classified. Prompted by the partial declassification initiatives of the Roh Moon-hyun administration, this article relies on recently released archival material and new scholarship in Japan, South Korea and the United Kingdom to consider the extent to which difficulties in the bilateral relationship were a product of traditional patterns of historical animosity, and to assess the role of the United States in bringing the contending parties together. In the process, the article critically considers the persuasiveness of international relations theory in making sense of changes in the post-war Korea-Japan relationship.

1 INTRODUCTION: AN UNDERDEVELOPED BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK—South Korea) are anomalous. A little like Arthur Conan Doyle’s ‘curious case of the dog in the night-time’ that failed to bark, the puzzle in the Japanese-Korean bilateral relationship has been the relative absence of co-operation and common purpose for much of the post-war period. For many of the past 60 years, since the formation of South Korea’s First Republic in 1948, these two states have confronted a common strategic and ideological adversary in the form of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK—North Korea), shared a Cold War ally in their more senior security partner, the United States (US), and
have increasingly benefited (particularly since the 1970s and the take-off in South Korea’s high-speed economic growth trajectory) from a close and interdependent economic relationship. Yet despite the importance of these ties, reinforced in the late 1980s with the shift from authoritarian to democratic government in South Korea, Koreans and Japanese—whether at the level of popular or élite interaction—have rarely appeared comfortable with one another. Despite (or perhaps precisely because of) a common Sino-centric cultural heritage, strong ethnic similarities and shared linguistic patterns, the two countries have more often than not stressed their differences and their divisions rather than their commonalities. The dominant narrative for most of the post-1945 era (indeed for much of the 20th century and into the 21st) has been one of rivalry and bitter disagreement, involving mutual economic boycotts, competing denunciations of either state by the political élites in both countries, frequent disagreements over rival historical interpretations and deep-seated and seemingly intractable territorial disputes. In spite of periodic calls for co-operation and the development, particularly since the ending of the Cold War, of a new regional strategic partnership, either formal or ‘virtual’ in form (Cossa 1999), Japan and South Korea have frequently remained stubbornly and puzzlingly estranged from one another.

Explanations for this lack of co-operation have varied. The more traditional, orthodox interpretations have focused on animosities and differences born out of the long history of national rivalry, and most importantly the tensions arising from Japan’s repressive and often brutal colonial domination of the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945 (Kim 2006; Lee Won-deog 2001; Hahm and Kim 2001). Others have elaborated on this theme, suggesting that the past has acted as a perpetual dead-weight, encumbering the relationship with unresolved issues of rival historical interpretation, even to the point where official apologies for the past have exacerbated bilateral tensions by fomenting domestic unrest and internal political ‘blow-back’ from disaffected nationalist constituencies in the country offering the apology (Lind 2005). Unsurprisingly, it is historians who have often been inclined to identify the past as a particular source of tension, and the relevance of such factors has been highlighted not only by government-to-government disputes, but also by the prominence, especially recently, of depictions in popular culture of past, present, and in some cases future, imagined bilateral rivalry. In 2002, for example, the release in South Korea of 2009 Lost Memories considered the fanciful notion of what