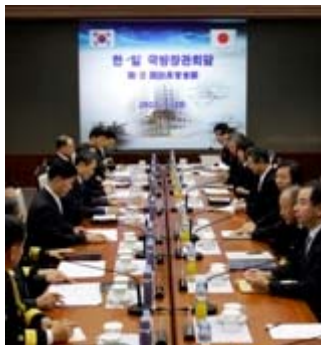


Japan-South Korea Relations: Time to Open Both Eyes

Current Issues in U.S.-ROK Relations

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There is an old Russian proverb that applies to current Japan-South Korea (ROK) relations: "Forget the past and lose an eye; dwell on the past and lose both eyes!" The Japanese, it would appear, are eager to forget the past, while the Koreans seem unable to see beyond it. It is time now for the United States' two most important Northeast Asian allies to work toward a better future with both eyes open.

In some instances the flare-ups in and between Japan and South Korea represent mere political opera with little real substance at stake. But the latest cause for tension—the ROK government's cancellation of both the June 29 signing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and its plan to pursue an equally sensitive (but sensible) military Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with Japan—has serious national security implications and affects Washington's relations with both nations. It also cost South Korea one of its more forward-thinking strategists, Senior Presidential Secretary for National Security Strategy Kim Tae-hyo, who lost his job. His "sin"? Putting Korea's national interests ahead of public opinion.

GSOMIA is a fairly routine agreement outlining procedures to facilitate the sharing of classified defense-related threat information regarding North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and other potential common security challenges. Its adoption would also make trilateral defense cooperation with Washington easier for both Japan and South Korea. Seoul has agreements similar to GSOMIA with some two dozen other countries. An ACSA allows for logistical cooperation when both countries are engaged in humanitarian assistance/ disaster relief and peacekeeping operations. Negotiations for both long-overdue pacts were finalized in May 2012. Unfortunately, that is when public opinion and national emotions took over in South Korea, turning what Professor Jeffrey Hornung described as "a practical, forward-looking effort to strengthen relations between two vibrant democracies facing

shared security challenges" into "another casualty of the complexities of politics and history."

Still, working behind the scenes, the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade succeeded in passing GSOMIA through the cabinet. When the Lee government publicly announced its plan to sign the GSOMIA agreement on June 29, while continuing its review of the ACSA, this provided opposition politicians—especially those who pander to citizens with lingering anti-Japanese feelings—with a political windfall they have chosen to exploit. Ruling party politicians have been equally shameful in their response. The South Korean press has also seen fit to help inflame rather than inform the public about the importance of such agreements.

Despite the subsequent cancellation of the GSOMIA signing and shelving of the ACSA, the Lee Myung-bak administration continues to pay lip service to the agreements, saying that they have not been scrapped, but merely postponed until a more propitious moment. However, no one sees that happening before the December 2012 ROK presidential election, thus resulting in more precious time wasted. Ironically, along the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, earlier this month, ROK foreign minister Kim Sung-hwan joined U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton and Japanese foreign minister Koichiro Gamba in agreeing to form a trilateral consultative body to "promote peace and stability in Northeast Asia." But will genuine consultation and real-world cooperation be possible between Seoul and Tokyo without GSOMIA and an ACSA? It is hard to imagine how.

In discussing the history issue, most Japanese and Korean interlocutors seem to agree on only one thing: the ball is in the other one's court. The Japanese claim, not without some merit, is that Tokyo has both acknowledged and apologized numerous times for its crimes during World War II: "How much longer," they ask, "are we to be punished for the sins of our great-grandfathers?" But other Japanese cannot seem to resist keeping the flames alive, claiming that the past never occurred or, more frequently, that it was not as bad as critics claim. Their argument that "only" eighty thousand Korean women, rather than the two hundred thousand that some Korean assert, were forced into slavery, only demonstrates insensitivity and a lack of remorse. Official Japanese government protests against "comfort women" statues that are springing up in the United States and South Korea further inflame the situation and prompt even more statues to be commissioned.

Tokyo should remember that democracies promote and guard "freedom of expression." The same goes for South Koreans who insist that the government of Japan issue a formal apology every time a private citizen or parliamentarian utters a preposterous statement denying what everyone knows is fact.

The most sensible U.S. response to the history debate is to say and do as little as possible. When faced with a lose-lose situation between two allies, it is normally more sensible not to play the game. But U.S.

territory is now part of the extended battlefield, and U.S. security interests are being at least peripherally affected. Seldom has a situation seemed more appropriate for a preventive diplomacy intervention than the current comfort women dispute between Tokyo and Seoul. The history dispute goes beyond the forced sexual slavery of Korean (and Filipino, Indonesian, Chinese, and other, including even Japanese) women by the Japanese Red Army during World War II, and there are territorial issues as well, but the comfort women issue has become the poster child and rallying point and must be dealt with first.

As an ally and trusted friend of both Japan and South Korea, the United States is well situated to play the mediator role, assuming both sides ask for the intervention—the first rule of preventive diplomacy is that outside assistance is voluntarily sought and accepted. President Obama should privately offer to provide an impartial mediator to help craft a statement that both sides can accept, in order to finally settle or at least depoliticize this issue, such as former president Bill Clinton or former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft.

President Lee, along with his Japanese counterpart Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko, has a golden opportunity to help Koreans and Japanese face the future with both eyes open by seeking and accepting outside mediation to put this cancerous issue behind for the sake of both nations. Or he, and the people of Korea, can remain consumed and blinded by their tragic past.

Though public sentiment in a democracy is important, one should keep in mind the comments attributed to a former U.S. president who, when reportedly asked if he knew what the American people really thought about a particular issue, replied, "I know what they damn well ought to think about it." It is this type of leadership that is needed most in Japan and South Korea right now to get beyond the past.

More About This Publication

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