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No Way Out?: The Trilateral Summit in the Hague and its Implications to South Korea-Japan Relations

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On March 25, South Korean President Park Geun-hye and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met for the first time at a trilateral summit arranged by U.S. President Barak Obama on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in Hague. There was significant attention centered upon the meeting, given that it was the first executive-level dialogue between South Korea and Japan in 22 months as well as the first occasion for Park and Abe to meet since their respective inaugurations. During the summit, Park avoided eye contact with Abe when Abe made a friendly introduction in Korean – a moment that symbolized the current and potential future state of affairs between the two countries. Although historical issues, the most critical friction point between South Korea and Japan, were excluded from the agenda, South Korea, the U.S. and Japan reaffirmed their trilateral cooperation on security issues related to the North Korea nuclear problem.

It is possible that the trilateral summit created some slight momentum toward an improvement in the relationship between Korea and Japan, but there is a long and winding road ahead before it can be brought back to a state of normalcy. This is partly due to repeated calls from members of Abe's government to review the components of the 1993 Kono Statement – an official acknowledgement of the Japanese military's use of comfort women during World War II – even though Abe made a promise in the Japanese Diet to follow the Statement. Therefore, despite scheduled talks between senior officials in April 2014, the possibility for a satisfactory settlement on the

comfort women issue is extremely low. As long as South Korea maintains strict adherence to its principle that Japan must correct its perception of history in order to improve South Korea-Japan relations, and Japan refuses to conduct a fundamental policy change on the issues of comfort women and the involuntary drafting of Koreans during World War II, the two countries will see no intersections in their stances and relations will steadily grow worse as each side feeds on growing nationalist sentiments.

Biased media reporting, growing nationalist sentiments, and the absence of communication between national leaders have all contributed to the deterioration of South Korea-Japan relations. In other words, the problems with this relationship can be regarded as perceptual rather than existential in nature. Moreover, there is much concern that strategic thinking toward South Korea-Japan relations is either being ignored or gradually marginalized. Although it may be possible to consider issues on history, security, economy and culture between South Korea and Japan as separate, the reality is that they are very much intertwined while public perceptions toward each other continuously drop to a dangerous level.

South Korea's Perception: Vigilance against the Return of Japanese Militarism by Abe

South Korea perceives that Japan under the leadership of Abe has moved dangerously to

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the right side of the political spectrum. This is the direct result of the words and actions of Abe. He has spoken about the possibility of withdrawing the Kono Statement altogether and he has also remarked that he will announce a new statement on the history issue in 2015 after modifying the 1995 Murayama statement. In addition, Abe has launched an effort to revise Japan's pacifist constitution and national security policies as a way to move away from the post-World War II structure. For these reasons, the South Korean media has sounded the alarm on the dangers of the Abe administration, greatly strengthening the belief that Abe is turning Japan back toward militarism.

Reinforcing South Korea's concerns is the unchecked stream of controversial remarks emerging from Japanese political circles. Consider Abe's troubling remarks on the definition of an aggressive war, Osaka Mayor Hashimoto's denial of comfort women, and Deputy Prime Minister Aso's remarks about a Nazi-style constitutional amendment.

On top of that, Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine and the Japanese government's movement to revisit the Kono Statement is picking up speed. Another worrying trend is Japan's accelerating revisionist approach toward its constitution and security policies. Japan's movement toward exercising collective self-defense and its establishment of the Japanese National Security Council implies a fundamental change of its security policies, which has exacerbated South Korea's concern and vigilance over the Abe administration. In fact, South Korea's current perception of Japan seems to simplify Abe's every move into an action in line with Japanese right-wing extremists. Whether Abe moves on the history issue, constitutional reform, national security or territorial policy, South Korea's perception

combines all of these issues into one package which is highlighted as Japan's turn to the right. This widely-held view in South Korea would explain why Park is reluctant to hold a summit with Abe.

Japan's Perception: Concerns over a History Alliance between South Korea and China

Meanwhile, there are equally-troubling aspects in Japan's perception of Korea, which is fraught with oversimplification and a lack of objectivity. In retrospect, Japan's negative view of South Korea quickly emerged after then-South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's surprise visit to the Dokdo Islands in 2012. His demand for an apology from the Japanese emperor for Japan's militaristic past and his undervaluing of Japan also contributed to Japan's growing negative perception of South Korea. Additionally, parts of Japanese society seem to exhibit exhaustion over the apology issue or even anti-Korean sentiments as demands for reparation surface and pressures to resolve the comfort women issue increase. This has become worse in light of the South Korean constitutional court's decision regarding the unconstitutionality of Japan's past actions, as well as the South Korean Supreme Court's ruling against involuntary drafting during the Japanese colonial period. Feeding onto such negative views are Japan's unspoken concerns over South Korea's rise as a strong economic competitor and rival, taking away the hierarchy that previously existed in the bilateral relationship and replacing it with a more horizontal one. The current Japanese perception of South Korea seems to reflect the difficulties in Japan's adjustment to this new structure. In other words, the Japanese society

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is feeling anxious about the notion of South Korea as an emerging middle power.

Another significant part of Japan’s negative perception stems from South Korea’s leaning toward China. This perception has been reinforced by diplomatic remarks, as well as Japan-related statements, by Park and other South Korean officials. Park repeatedly mentioned that South Korea-Japan relations cannot be improved without Japan’s proper perception of history. Her critical remarks against Japan during state visits with the U.S., China, and key states in the European Union (EU) have also contributed to Japan’s negative perception of South Korea. This has resulted in a widespread belief throughout the Japanese society that Park is intentionally avoiding a bilateral summit with Abe while she continues to pay greater attention to China. The Japanese media, including right-wing magazines, have even run feature-length articles that heavily criticized the so called “history-based alliance between South Korea and China.”

Considering how much China is viewed as a threat, there is a widespread perception throughout the Japanese society that South Korea is being too naïve with China. It is true that a large portion of the Japanese population is angry with China over the growing Sino-Japanese conflict over the Senkaku Islands. From the Japanese perspective, China, despite its remarkable economic growth and emergence as a political and military power, is fraught with internal problems such as the socio-economic gap, political authoritarianism, corruption, ethnic conflict and the bubble economy. Instead of being wary of such issues, Japan finds South Korea’s cooperation with China to be problematic given that such movement amounts to a shared anti-Japanese stance in areas such as the history perception issue.

What is more serious is that such negative mutual perceptions between South Korea and Japan seem to worsen as they go through a vicious cycle instead of a subsiding trend. When distortive news reports from the two countries add to the lack of communication and dialogue between political leaders, this vicious cycle of negative mutual perceptions tends to become exacerbated. Therefore, in order to overcome the currently deteriorating relations between South Korea and Japan, it is necessary to hold an early summit meeting between the two leaders that could facilitate candid discussions about current issues. In doing so, both sides would feel more comfortable with making a breakthrough in the current state of South Korea-Japan relations and finding solutions to the recurring issues. However, there will be many considerable difficulties before it is possible to actually have such a summit between President Park and Prime Minister Abe. As long as the pull toward the need for improved cooperative relations between South Korea and Japan remains weaker than the push coming from deep-seated antagonism over history, it will be difficult to hold a summit meeting between Park and Abe for some time.

Finding a Way Out: A Concerted Effort by Government and Society

Nonetheless, if a summit between South Korea and Japan were to be held, it would likely cover three main issues. First, it would be necessary to confirm that the Abe administration will uphold previous statements and positions of the Japanese government on the history issue. Second, the two countries must agree to a principle that aims to resolve the comfort women and involuntary draftee issues, which

includes compensation for the draftees. Third, the two countries must agree upon a 2015 future cooperation initiative in order to improve and bring the current state of South Korea-Japan relations back to normalcy. If an immediate meeting between the two leaders proves to be difficult, pre-negotiations and coordination on these issues would be desirable at the working-level in order to facilitate an eventual summit.

In light of the 50th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan in 2015, the governments of the two countries need to work together to upgrade the 1998 South Korea-Japan Joint Declaration from what was once called “a new South Korea-Japan partnership toward the twenty-first century” into a “2015 South Korea-Japan Joint Declaration of the new era in the twenty-first century.” In order to resolve issues on the comfort women and post-World War II reparations, a so-called “New Joint Organization for History Reconciliation between South Korea and Japan” may be formed at the non-governmental level to conduct joint research until 2015, while the two governments focus on current issues such as security, economy and culture. Such a division of labor between government and society in South Korea and Japan may offer an escape from the current deteriorating relations. If such a non-governmental organization is to be formed, it will require experts and leaders from the legal sector and civil society of both countries. This joint organization may also operate in a Track 1.5 environment that would go beyond previous attempts of joint history committees that centered on scholars. ■

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