

Japan-Korea Relations: Time for U.S. Intervention?

BY *Daniel Sneider*

On a recent trip I took to Seoul, a senior South Korean official offered a dark assessment of relations with neighboring Japan, suggesting that they were at an all-time low since the normalization of diplomatic ties in 1965. The leaders of the two countries have not held a bilateral summit in two years, and the general tone has been hostile.

Disturbed by this trend, the United States gingerly intervened to encourage dialogue between its two principal allies in Northeast Asia. During his visit to both capitals, Vice President Joe Biden publicly urged reconciliation. In Seoul, he privately conveyed Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's desire to hold a summit with his South Korean counterpart, President Park Geun-hye. This message was reinforced by China's decision to unilaterally declare a new air defense identification zone in the East China Sea.

However, the United States' tentative intervention is not likely to change the dynamic of Japan-Korea relations. In defiance of U.S. advice that was largely delivered in private, Abe carried out a visit on December 26 to the Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's war dead, prompting not only the anticipated condemnation of the South Korean and Chinese governments but also an unusual public statement of U.S. "disappointment" in that decision. This latest development only reinforces the need for U.S. policymakers to seriously consider playing a more direct, mediating role between Japan and South Korea, not only on security issues but also in dealing with the problems of wartime history.

SIGNS OF A DEEPER FREEZE

Under the scrutiny of a watchful Korean media, President Park Geun-hye continues to assert that a summit can only take place after Japan takes "sincere measures" to restore trust. Senior Korean officials point to two steps in particular that could pave the way for resumed high-level contact: a clear and unambiguous confirmation of the validity and immutability of past apologies by Japan for its wartime history and new steps to apologize to and compensate the remaining Korean women who were forcibly recruited under Japanese colonial rule into sexual servitude during the war (the so-called comfort women). Even prior to Abe's Yasukuni visit, Korean officials argued that without such moves any summit would amount to nothing more than a photo op and could well be followed by some fresh reminder of Japanese views on the war that would only inflame public opinion and worsen relations. That concern has now acquired much greater credibility.

In Tokyo, senior officials show very little interest in taking any steps that might be construed as a concession to Korean concerns, arguing that the Koreans have adopted a "pro-China" policy. Japanese policymakers believe that their emphasis therefore should be on improving relations with China, and that Korea will follow along in China's wake. The visit to Yasukuni suggests that Abe may not even be counting on an improvement in relations with Beijing. His policy rests mostly on close security ties with the United States and a more assertive presence elsewhere in Asia, particularly with respect to Southeast Asia and India.

As a result, the senior Korean official observed that in Japan "there is a rising 'Korea fatigue.'" According to this official, the Japanese believe that they have made enough apologies for the war and that no amount of apologizing will satisfy Korea's demands. In addition, "Japan firmly maintains that all forms of legal compensation were settled through the 1965 normalization agreement."

Korean officials also sense a bit of fatigue in Washington and a tendency to buy the Japanese narrative that depicts Abe as a pragmatist facing a stubborn and emotional Korean leader. That perception may be shifting again, but there is clearly a lack of patience in Washington with the wartime historical issues and a tendency to regard this dispute as a “personal” problem between the two leaders.

Contrary to those perceptions, however, the chill in relations predates the electoral triumphs of Abe and Park in December 2012. Their predecessors also clashed sharply over issues of history, though undoubtedly relations have gone into a deeper freeze this past year. Abe entered office with a well-deserved reputation as a conservative nationalist who holds decidedly revisionist views about Japan’s wartime past. He campaigned on a pledge to revise the two most important official statements of Japanese responsibility for wartime crimes—the 1993 Kono statement on “comfort women” and the 1995 Murayama apology for aggression and colonial rule. In the statement issued on his visit to Yasukuni, Abe again pointedly did not repeat the key wording of the Murayama statement acknowledging Japan’s “aggression” and apologizing for colonial rule. Such actions make Korean officials, from the president on down, deeply wary of yielding to U.S. pressure to simply put the past aside.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Korea is increasingly looking for the United States to go beyond merely conveying messages to and from Tokyo. One Korean official told me that “the gap in perception between Korea and Japan has become so wide that it is difficult to resolve the issues solely through bilateral discussions.” However, U.S. intervention to mediate historical matters is not endorsed in Tokyo, nor is this approach embraced by Washington. While Biden, and the U.S. statement

issued after Abe’s Yasukuni visit, expressed support for Japan and Korea resolving historical and territorial issues, the vice president also stated that “the United States does not intend to act as a mediator.”

This is a long-standing U.S. position, but there are precedents for the United States to play a different role. During the Clinton administration, the United States was the active mediator of negotiations to create an official German fund to compensate victims of wartime forced labor, as I have written about [elsewhere](#). The United States was also involved in peace negotiations concerning two U.S. allies in Northern Ireland, where it mediated between Great Britain and Ireland under tense circumstances.

U.S. reluctance to wade into these issues in Northeast Asia is understandable. But it is increasingly evident that Japan and Korea cannot resolve these tensions on their own and that the problems of the past will not simply go away. Rather, the deterioration of relations between Japan and Korea will continue to cause instability at a time when Northeast Asia faces far more serious threats to its security from North Korea and China. A more active U.S. role requires taking risks and exercising leadership. One possible step is to appoint a special envoy, as the United States did with Northern Ireland, or someone to play the role carried out by former Clinton administration official Stuart Eizenstat in negotiating German reparations. Reconciliation will not be the product of passivity. ♦

DANIEL SNEIDER is the Associate Director for Research at the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University. He can be reached at <dsneider@stanford.edu>.

The NBR Analysis Brief provides commentary on the Asia-Pacific from leading scholars and experts. The views expressed are those of the author.