

Korea-Japan: Time for Outside Mediation?

by Ralph A. Cossa

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"Forget the past and lose an eye; dwell on the past and lose both eyes!"

This old Russian proverb comes to mind whenever I think of current Japan-Korea relations. The Japanese, it would appear, are eager to forget the past, while the Koreans can't seem to see beyond it. Isn't it time for America's two key Northeast Asian allies to work toward a better future with both eyes open?

In some instances the flare-ups represent mere political opera with little of 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 also affects Washington's relations with both nations. It also cost one of South Korea's more forward thinking strategists, senior presidential secretary for national security strategy Kim Tae-Hyo, his job. His "sin"? He put Korea's national interests ahead of public opinion.

GSOMIA is not some nefarious plot, as some critics in Korea are making it out to be. It's a fairly routine agreement outlining procedures which would help facilitate the sharing of classified defense-related threat information dealing with North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and other potential common security challenges. It would also make trilateral defense cooperation with Washington easier for both. Seoul has similar agreements with some two dozen other countries and is talking about negotiating a similar agreement with Beijing (an effort that seems aimed more at generating political cover but would be useful nonetheless, but only after moving forward with the Japan agreement). An ACSA allows for logistical cooperation when both are engaged in humanitarian

assistance/disaster relief and peacekeeping operations. Both pacts, long overdue, were scheduled to be signed in May. Unfortunately, that's when public opinion and national emotions took over in South Korea, turning what Professor Jeffery 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."

The announcement of the impending signing provided opposition politicians – especially those who pander to citizens with lingering anti-Japanese feelings (which, unfortunately, is just about everyone in South Korea) – with a political windfall they have chosen to shamelessly exploit. Ruling party politicians have been equally shameful in their response – I guess it's too much to expect political courage in an election year (a malady not unique to South Korea, I would hasten to add). The South Korean press has also seen fit to help inflame rather than help inform the public about the importance of such agreements.

The Lee Myung-bak administration continues to pay lip service to the agreements, saying they have not been scrapped but merely shelved until a more propitious moment. No one sees that moment coming before the December ROK presidential elections, however, resulting in more precious time being wasted. Ironically, along the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia earlier this month, ROK Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan joined US 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's 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. Japanese claim, not without some merit, that Tokyo has both acknowledged and apologized numerous times for the crimes of World War Two; "how much longer," they ask, "are we to be punished for the sins of our great-grandfathers." But other Japanese can't seem to resist

keeping the flames alive, claiming the past never occurred or, more frequently, that it wasn't as bad as critics claim (as if it's somehow OK if "only" 80,000 Korean women were forced into sex slavery rather than the 200,000 that some Koreans claim). Official Japanese government protests against "comfort women" statues which are springing up in the US as well as in South Korea further inflame the situation and prompt even more statues to be commissioned.

Note to Tokyo: it's called "freedom of expression"; it's what happens in democracies. Ditto to South Koreans who insist that the government of Japan issue a formal apology every time some private citizen or parliamentarian utters a preposterous statement denying what everyone knows is fact. Democracy 101: go back and read the rules! If President Obama had to apologize for every foolish remark made by a member of the US Congress, he would never get off his knees.

I have long argued that the most sensible US 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, like it or not, US territory has now become part of the extended battlefield, and US 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 Imperial Army during World War Two, of course, and there are territorial issues to boot, 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 nations, Washington 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 help finally settle or at least depoliticize this issue. Someone like former President Bill Clinton or former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft comes quickly to mind.

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 (and Japan), can remain consumed and blinded by their tragic past.

I fully understand the importance of public sentiment in a democracy but am also reminded of comments attributed to a former US President, who when reportedly asked if he knew what the American people really thought about a particular issue, relied "I know what they damn well ought to think about it." That's called leadership, and that's what's really needed to get beyond the past.

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