

Japan, Korea and reconciliation by Daniel Bob

Daniel Bob (dbob@spfusa.org) is Senior Fellow and Director of Programs at Sasakawa USA.

Over the weekend, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Korea's President Park Geun-hye met at the East Asian Summit in Malaysia – the third time the two have seen each other directly in less than two months. They first met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly on September 28, then held a full bilateral summit on November 2, marking their first since the leaders took office more than three years ago.

Based on discussions with aides to both leaders, those talks have opened a window of opportunity for resolving the biggest obstacle to improved Japan-Korea relations – the issue of “comfort women,” the mostly Korean girls and women forced to become sex slaves for Japan's military during World War II.

Hurdles remain, but resolution of the issue would put Japan-Korea relations back on track after an extended period in which the two sides were hardly talking to one another. Both countries would benefit, as would the broader Asia Pacific, including the United States. In particular, the success of America's rebalance to Asia, a critical strategy enjoying broad bipartisan support, depends heavily on cooperation with and among US friends and allies in the region – and Japan and Korea are our most important.

The issue came to light in the early 1990s when some of the women, previously fearing the stigma of acknowledging what they went through, finally went public with their stories. Japan has taken steps over the years to address the issue, but never sufficient for the Koreans to put it to rest.

Except for historical revisionists in both countries, the dispute boils down to a need for Japan to apologize sincerely for what it did to these women and for Korea to accept that apology without reservation. Until that happens, relations between the two countries will continue to drift.

2015 marks 50 years since the normalization of Japan-Korea ties, a milestone providing special impetus for resolution of the issue. In addition, only a few dozen of these victimized women, all in their 80s and 90s, are still alive. Once they have passed away, healing the wounds they suffered will no longer be possible and repairing the resulting damage to bilateral relations will prove more difficult.

The good news is that Japan and Korea understand that neither benefits from continued antagonism over the issue, and both now seem open to a fresh approach. One that would go a long way toward putting the issue to rest – while simultaneously enhancing Prime Minister Abe's reputation for statesmanship and boosting President Park's flagging domestic political fortunes – would be a direct meeting between the

survivors and the Prime Minister in which he expressed his personal condolences to the women for the horrors they suffered.

Such a meeting would demonstrate sincere contrition by the Prime Minister on behalf of Japan, and, if accepted by the survivors, make broader acceptance across Korea almost certain.

In addition, Japan should create a new reparations fund for the survivors, one wholly financed by the government, to demonstrate responsibility for their plight. Finally, Korea should remove a statue of one of the victims that is currently located in a park directly across the street from the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. While the city of Seoul owns the park, the national government should seek a way to move the statue as a demonstration that Korea accepts the steps Japan takes.

Orchestrating these arrangements will require the two sides to overcome their deep distrust of one another. Tokyo will have to assure Seoul that it will not tolerate words or deeds by cabinet members that would undercut Japan's actions. Seoul will have to convince Tokyo that it will accept the Prime Minister's apology without reservation. And both sides will likely need to conclude a written understanding so that reconciliation today can withstand possible attempts at reversal tomorrow.

While the path to reconciliation between Japan and Korea on this issue will be difficult, the two countries should seize the opportunity for progress that Prime Minister Abe and President Park have created. By successfully putting the legacies of World War II behind them, Japan and Korea, which share so many values and interests, will finally be free to cooperate more fully with one another – and jointly with the United States and other countries – in addressing regional and global challenges.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.