



Time to hit the reset button on Tokyo-Seoul relations by
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The problem with the current deadlock in Japan-South Korea relations is that both sides don't feel too uncomfortable about it because they prioritize their relationship with the United States and China, the two heavyweight stakeholders in the region. Seoul and Tokyo feel ambivalent about how important the other side is at a time when geopolitical fluidity is increasing in East Asia – a factor that influences dynamics between Japan and South Korea.

Pessimism is rampant. In fact, pessimism is so great that even an argument such as “only time will solve the problem” is suggested as a solution. The danger of this logic is that both sides can settle for waiting for the other side to scream “ouch” first. There is no reason to believe that time will run its healing course and salvage the relationship, which is at its lowest since the two countries normalized relations in 1965. The relationship will drift further apart without active intervention. But how?

Some say the issue really is a narrative over the wartime sex slaves, also known as “comfort women.” Others argue it is in fact a veiled legal affair that may open up a flood of lawsuits. Some others say it is essentially a moral issue. These are all valid points underscoring different aspects of the convoluted matter.

What is missing in the debate is the underlying psychology and attitude that often eludes analysis. Seoul and Tokyo brush aside each other as a secondary stakeholder as they devote diplomatic resources and attention to coping with the seismic geopolitical shift led by Beijing and Washington.

Washington is the most important security ally for both Seoul and Tokyo. Beijing is the most important economic partner for both Seoul and Tokyo. Thus, Seoul and Tokyo also feel ambiguous toward the other's strategic values. Both countries see the other as a less important security partner compared to Washington. They also see each other as a less important economic partner compared to Beijing.

Seoul and Tokyo are not sure how important the other side is. As a result, there is less interest in and enthusiasm for tackling problems in their relationship. Both countries want to see how much damage the other side can tolerate if they give it the cold shoulder. This psychology dampens the political will

to work out a solution. Left unattended, the relationship has been pummeled by hard-line voices on both sides.

The current stalemate undermines political trust, depresses economic ties, and dampens the spirit of civilian exchanges. To mend the situation, the following should be robustly discussed and brainstormed among scholars and strategists in both Tokyo and Seoul.

First, remember President Richard Nixon's diplomacy in 1972. During the closed-door negotiations in Beijing between him and Mao Zedong, little concrete agreement emerged. The symbolism of the trip proved extremely powerful, however. The lack of photo-ops between South Korean President Park Geun-hye and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo is unsettling to many observers. So, to begin, Park and Abe should have more photo-ops to relieve the anxiety of concerned members of the public in both countries. Even establishing the image of a cordial and accommodative handshake will warm the atmosphere. Substance can come later.

Second, remember that Seoul and Tokyo are in the same basket. As the East Asian political landscape undergoes seismic changes and poses new challenges, it's natural that both Seoul and Tokyo think about their own strategic positioning. Here, often their differences are highlighted while their common elements are ignored. In fact, however, both Seoul and Tokyo are facing the same challenges: dealing with the rise of China and maintaining a robust security alliance with Washington. Focus on this common aspect and build on it.

Third, the current hiccup has an interesting feature: it's primarily driven by the political leadership in the two countries. Politics, by nature, often sees its own virtue in sustaining a posture of non-compromise. As a result, we should vigorously seek alternative avenues for fostering dialogue among non-politicians, such as nongovernmental organizations and academic conferences as well as media panels, cultural events, and student exchanges.

We should not despair because politics hijacks the two countries' relationship. In democracies, citizens shouldn't give up on their right to check and balance their government. We shouldn't give license to the current South Korea-Japan relational paralysis. It doesn't serve either country well.

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