



Silence is Golden by Junbeom Pyon and Qinghong Wang

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Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's controversial statements about "comfort women" have invited fierce criticism from the West. But it is noteworthy to observe how China and Korea have dealt with the issue. In a stark contrast to the past, they have been restrained: no organized demonstrations in Beijing or Seoul, no cancellations of government-to-government dialogues, and only muted, rueful comments from foreign ministries.

It is still unclear why Abe made his statement denying official involvement in the "comfort women" controversy. There have been several suggestions: his own conservatism, excessive legalistic reasoning, and pandering to his conservative base. But while old thinking seemingly prevails in Tokyo, new thinking is clearly emerging in Beijing and Seoul. Although the ROK Foreign Ministry "urged responsible leaders of Japan to have a correct understanding of history," the fourth Japan-ROK vice ministerial strategic dialogue was still carried out in March 2007. In China, Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing said "Japan should face up to history and take responsibility." But Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Japan is still on schedule. There is no sign that either government is prepared to stop official meetings with Japan as a result of Abe's statements.

Their reasons vary. At the tactical level, Beijing wants to ensure that Wen's overdue visit to Tokyo in mid April goes as planned. Seoul wants to see a realization of the promises made in the first phase of the Feb. 13 Six-Party Talks agreement. At the strategic level, both governments have realized that playing the anti-Japanese card has become too costly and jeopardizes national interests.

Beijing and Seoul place importance on regional stability. The 2008 Olympics will be held in Beijing and the Six-Party Talks need to move forward. Visible and vehement anti-Japanese movements in China will damage the PRC's image as a responsible stakeholder. Furthermore, Beijing and Seoul need to show that they are capable of thinking beyond nationalism and of cooperating with neighboring countries. Fanning the flames of nationalism is the height of irresponsibility.

Second, both governments seek regional economic integration and want to keep relations with Japan moving forward. China needs continued economic investment and the transfer of technology from Japan to sustain its economic

growth. Korea prefers that Korean and Japanese corporations cooperate to hedge against Chinese economic competition.

Third, it must be acknowledged that some in China and Korea welcome friction in the U.S.-Japan alliance. Abe's statement caused great discomfort in Washington. As China seeks to extend its influence in Asia, a gradual weakening of the U.S.-Japan alliance serves its long-term strategic interests. Seoul has long complained that the U.S. favors Japan over the ROK. Thus, mild friction in the U.S.-Japan alliance is welcome news to those who seek more balance between the U.S.-Japan and the U.S.-ROK alliances.

There are limits to this schadenfreude, however. Neither Beijing nor Seoul would like to see this become a diplomatic crisis that will impact regional stability. Both China and South Korea believe that serious damage to the U.S.-Japan alliance will force Japan to accelerate its militarization and the 'normalization' process. Both Beijing and Seoul view the U.S.-Japan alliance as a mechanism to prevent or at least limit the intent and pace of Japanese militarization.

Fourth, both Beijing and Seoul recognize that criticism of Tokyo will trigger defensive nationalism among the Japanese public against China and Korea. Informed Chinese and South Koreans believe that the Japanese public would not support a truly conservative agenda. Democracy in Japan has penetrated its society and the majority in Japan prefers healthy diplomatic relations with their neighbors. Thus, the new strategic thinking in the ROK and China is to let the conservatives make mistakes and lose public support, thus bringing about organic regime change in Tokyo.

Fifth, Beijing and Seoul have discovered an interesting phenomenon as Abe and his colleagues refused to acknowledge Tokyo's role in recruiting the wartime "comfort women." The U.S. ambassador to Japan, the U.S. Congress, the Department of State, the Australian prime minister, the foreign minister of Canada, the governments of the Netherlands and the Philippines, as well as various human rights organizations protested Abe's comments. It is no longer a regional issue, but has become an international concern. By relinquishing the lead in criticizing Tokyo, Beijing and Seoul have made what could have been a regional historical issue into an international human rights concern.

Regardless of their motives, Beijing and Seoul's self-restraint is a constructive gesture for building mutual trust with Japan. Both countries seek to move beyond historical obstacles and beyond nationalism.

Tokyo should not squander this opportunity. Japan needs to accept history and show the world its sincerity and its capability to be a responsible and a respected actor in the international community, especially when Tokyo pursues a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. This

would allow the three countries to discuss economic integration, an Asian security mechanism, a regional framework that serves the economic and security interests of the entire region, and prevent a clash of nationalisms. This all depends on Japan's – and our own governments' – actions.

Time could be running short, however. Even though China and South Korea are working to maintain regional stability and to convince Abe that his comments are not helpful, Abe may keep playing the nationalism card. If so, China and the ROK may not be able to persuade their own publics to remain quiet. Thus, we suggest the following to our governments:

While continuing restrained public responses, Beijing and Seoul must send clear messages to Tokyo drawing “red lines.” Both Beijing and Seoul should be prepared for the worst-case scenario: Abe may seek to woo conservatives and visit Yasukuni Shrine.

Should Abe persist in beating nationalistic drums, Beijing and Seoul should explore alternative, more efficient approaches to fight rightwing extremism in Japan instead of simply making collective threats or feeding their own nationalists.

First, Beijing and Seoul can lobby Washington to more effectively use its influence on Tokyo. With the first Democratic-dominated U.S. Congress since 1994, China and the ROK now have a better chance of persuading the U.S. to play a more active role in dealing with historical issues in the region. Many of these issues are related to human rights violations, which are among Democrat's priorities. House Resolution 121 in the U.S. Congress is a good example. As the strongest ally of Japan, the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific region, and the architect of the post-WWII international order, Washington can play a crucial role in helping guide Japan.

Second, China and South Korea can mobilize NGOs. Learning from the Jewish community's effort to denounce Nazi wartime crimes, Beijing and Seoul should support NGOs to make “comfort women,” the rape of Nanking, and other Japanese wartime crimes internationally notorious, especially in the West. By focusing on human rights violations and using movies, exhibitions, and tour presentations of victims, using celebrities, and the power of visual images, NGOs can frame these historical issues internationally, and create sufficient negative impact to prevent Japanese politicians from using them.

Hopefully, it will not come to this. There is a strategic opportunity for Abe to correct the nationalistic trend in Japan and move the country toward better relations with its neighbors.

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