

Ghosts of History 1, Asian Security 0

by Robert Manning

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As Secretary of State Clinton and Asia-Pacific ministers gathered in Phnom Penh for a series of security meetings last week, the telling reality of regional security occurred elsewhere. A week earlier, the controversy that led South Korean (ROK) NSC Advisor Kim Tae-hyo to resign and the recent South Korean government decision to postpone the signing of its first military cooperation agreement with Japan speaks volumes about the power of historical memory shaping perceptions and limiting security cooperation in the region.

Though largely swept under the rug at the high-level regional schmooze-fests, and dismissed as election year politics, Seoul's decision underscores how heavily the ghosts of history weigh on major Asian nations as they address security issues. This move to put a new level of military cooperation on ice occurred despite a broad consensus among the military elites, foreign ministries, and national security advisors in both the ROK and Japan.

Ghosts of History

Seoul and Tokyo are two close democratic US allies, with shared concerns about a burgeoning Chinese military power with uncertain intentions and nearly unconditional support for an erratic, unpredictable, and nuclear North Korea. Yet the bitter taste of Japan's colonial legacy still informs Korean public opinion. The Korean media is filled with editorials warning to keep a close watch on "Japan re-arming," even going nuclear. Remarkably, in Seoul, it seems more controversial to be labeled "pro-Japanese" by critics than "pro-North Korean."

Japan has hardly helped live down the past. It seems like at least once a year some senior Japanese official manages to make an outrageous statement denying Japan's past in Korea. Most recently was an incident last April where Shigeyuke Hiroki, the Japanese Consul General in New York, suggested that the town of Palisades Park, New Jersey remove a Comfort Women Monument (to Korean sex slaves in WW2), and offered trees, a youth exchange program between the two countries, and books for the public library.

Such episodes and lingering territorial disputes over the Tokdo/Takeshima rocks that occasionally erupt have fueled lingering bitterness and suspicion about Japan in Korea.

The power of national memory has complicated the efforts of Asian security strategists. Asian hands in and out of the US government have for more than a decade advocated more trilateral US- ROK-Japan cooperation. To date, trilateral efforts have been largely limited to regular consultations about dealing with North Korea and occasional defense consultations and exercises.

But as North Korea continues to develop new medium and long-range ballistic missiles, and China evolves an impressive array of high tech military capabilities, a detached observer might conclude that the ROK and Japan have much common cause in regard to their respective national security priorities.

The point of highlighting Korean hesitation in going forward with a new level of military cooperation with Japan is not to overstate the problem. No doubt, the accord will eventually be signed. Yet our two allies stumble over what many would consider a "no-brainer" - a measure of just how complicated the Asian security predicament is.

Asia Hedging

Since the end of the Cold War, the predominant geopolitical reality has been one of hedging against uncertainty. This despite large and growing intra-Asian and trans-Pacific economic integration. Many Asian nations continue look to the United States as a critical strategic balancer, but wonder about American staying power. Doubts loom about China's direction and intentions, yet all Asian nations fear being forced to choose between the United States and China.

This helps explain why efforts to foster a new security architecture have gone nowhere. If two democratic allies are stalked by their past, how can one expect other Asian actors to move towards more cooperative security arrangements? After all, the Chinese have their own vivid recall of Japan's World War II conduct--and much more divergent current interests. There are virtually no Asian nations who would accept their current borders as permanent--the exact opposite of Europe.

To be sure, there are proliferations of regular annual dialogues, from the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to the Shangri-la dialogue to the East Asia Summit (EAS). There is a steady barrage of proposals for things like an Asian version of the OSCE, for nuclear free zones. These latter ideas have fallen on deaf ears. Such forums are among many redundant groupings that have generated occasionally serious discussion, and may have been useful in limiting hostilities over a welter of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, but show no signs of congealing into a new security architecture for the region.

The days of hubs and spokes may be gone, but alliances and partnerships with an American balancing role remain the underpinning of a somewhat static Asian security situation.

Bolstering ROK and Japanese military cooperation and enhanced US-ROK-Japan trilateral collaboration makes imminent sense in this context. But the pathologies curbing such cooperation suggest how far Asia is from a new security era. Whether it is a Tsunami, an imploding North Korea, or tensions in the South China Sea, who ya gonna call?

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