



WITH ABE'S DEPARTURE, WHAT NEXT FOR SEOUL?

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Abe Shinzo, Japan's longest-serving prime minister, has left the scene. Not many Korea analysts were Abe fans for any number of reasons (his nationalist tendencies, the militarization effort he led, typified by his push to revise the "peace constitution," and his hardline approach to South Korea, particularly in 2019). I've met with numerous Japanese visitors over time, including a vice foreign minister and Diet delegations visiting New York City to provide a read on North Korea and to encourage a positive line with South Korea.

Despite the efforts of those of us who've pushed a more accommodating line, my concern now is that a replacement like the hawkish Ishiba Shigeru or Abe's close confidant Suga Yoshihide, who served as his chief cabinet secretary since 2012, could espouse an even harder line or play to nationalist sentiments to foster the base during the Covid challenge, economic downturn, and delay (and possibly cancellation) of the Summer Olympics.

The Blue House responded well to Abe's departure, extending its sympathies and noting efforts at bilateral relations. This was a hard call for South Korean President Moon Jae-in, because actual sentiments differ, and Abe in Seoul's view made misstep after misstep. Still, phrasing it in a more positive light affords face-saving and thus an opening for the next leader to improve the bilateral relationship.

Seoul should turn now to a three-pronged approach that encourages 1) a renewed and stronger political relationship; 2) economic repair with a shared relisting of preferential goods to trade; and 3) information sharing on North Korea, in particular regarding the missile, nuclear, and abductee issues—all critical to Japan but which require a steady effort from the ROK to share intelligence—even as Seoul maintains its inter-Korean commitments and proclivities.

The Olympics is another point worth elevating. For the Republic of Korea government to voice its support now (with the caveat, of course, that health concerns be addressed) would be appropriate, while also reminding Japan and the world of the success of the PyeongChang Olympics. Also, Korea should appeal to the Japanese public; soft power (BTS, anyone?) and talk of cultural exchange also have value.

Bridging the divisions that have built up in the two-way relationship will not be easy, but these are still recommended steps for Seoul to take as Tokyo transitions at the leadership level. Some in Seoul would oppose any softening, but that's not really what this is. Amid Tokyo's present uncertainty Korea now has the stronger leadership and polity; it should play to that reality, especially on the winds of April's political win for the ruling Democratic Party in the National Assembly elections. Such moves will not resolve all of the disputes that have built up between the two sides and the two publics, but such moves have real benefits for Seoul—not to mention Tokyo and Washington.

What now for the US-Japan relationship? In terms of the heralded relationship between the Japanese and US leaders, Abe tried with Trump and it was suggested that he had as much sway with the American president as any foreign leader. But differences did persist, and Washington often acted contrary to Abe's wishes. Washington wants and needs strong trilateral and bilateral relations with Korea and Japan, especially given the substantial downturn in China relations. Whether 2021 inaugurates a Joe Biden administration or Trump's second term, there will be a more pro-alliance disposition when it comes to Korea and Japan given

China's recent moves (including the new National Security Law and loss of freedoms in Hong Kong, the South China Sea's militarization, and the oppression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang).

Lastly, whoever is chosen as the next prime minister, it must be considered that this may be a short to midterm political reality for Tokyo, should voters prefer the young Environment Minister Koizumi Shinjiro or another from the new generation in the next general election (scheduled in or before October 2021). Moon Jae-in could realize an opportunity here to move Korea-Japan relations and, by extension, trilateral relations to a new and better place.

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