Tokyo and Seoul are indisputably Washington’s two most important allies in Asia. They are not only central to America’s security architecture for the region, they are also important economic partners and share common values such as democracy and a commitment to the rule of law. And yet the prospect of a deep and effective trilateral relationship among the three countries has proved elusive. Is there a path forward?

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A Japanese Perspective
US Example Might Help
Japan Confront History

By Kazuhiko Togo

Despite fragile steps toward reconciliation, Japan continues to have major “history” issues with both Korea and China. Efforts to put the past to rest have foundered on the shoals of nationalism and domestic politics, while Japan’s apologies and other actions have not succeeded, writes Kazuhiko Togo, despite some sincere efforts. One way forward might be found in Japan-US steps in recent years to achieve greater understanding.

IN EARLY 2017, there is no doubt that Japan still faces serious history issues with both South Korea and China. The last few years saw some positive steps toward reconciliation, but regrettably the overall situation has worsened recently. In contrast, Japan’s history conflicts with the United States have taken concrete steps toward reconciliation over the last two years.

Certainly the Dec. 28, 2015, agreement reached between the governments of Japan and South Korea on comfort women was an important step toward reconciliation. The two governments agreed not to let the issue become a major political problem that would separate them, thus making consultations on such crucial issues as North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, the deployment of the US Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade accord seem possible.¹

Progress Derailed
Then the Choi Soon-sil scandal in South Korea, which erupted in October 2016, drastically changed this perspective. The rapid demise of President Park Geun-hye’s presidency also resulted in the unwinding of her political initiatives. The comfort women agreement became an easy target for popular criticism. For Japan, the government and the public in general remained calm when the comfort women issue re-emerged in the heated rhetoric of the campaign for the next presidency. But when South Korean popular emotion resulted in the erection of a new statue representing comfort women in front of the Japanese consulate in the city of Busan, the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe responded, recalling its ambassador and consul-general. The reactions in the Japanese media tended to support Abe’s position on the Busan statue, with few objections seen.

On the Japanese side, I think the backlash is legitimate; it was fair to expect that the December 2015 agreement, reached after much difficulty and sincere compromise on both sides, should be respected by both sides. At the same time, there has to be a clear recognition in Japan that the agreement would not end the debate on this issue but be a starting point. There must be no illusion that the agreement could alter Japan’s fundamental position as the perpetrator of past crimes nor that Japan would now be freed of this “memory.” In that context, the Abe government should reaffirm the best part of Abe’s August 2015 statement, namely: “We must not let our [future] generations be predestined to apologize. Still, even so, we Japanese, across generations, must squarely face past history. We have the responsibility to inherit the past, in all humbleness, and pass it on to the future.’ This statement precisely requires continued remembrance and humility after actions were taken based on the December 2015 agreement.

Patience Required
The comfort women statue raised a relatively minor issue of “peace and dignity” for a foreign mission’s working environment under the Vienna Convention of 1961. But it has now been inflated into a gigantic matter of popular and national emotion. Given the current political turmoil, the South Korean government does not seem to have the capacity to implement its commitment to preserve a foreign mission’s “peace and dignity.” Time — in other words, Japanese patience — may be the only way to de-escalate the emotions behind the statue issue.

On the South Korean side, I hope that after a new president is elected in May this year, the victor, likely to be from the current opposition, will respect the December 2015 agreement. I believe that it will be critically important that international opinion sides with this view.

There are already some encouraging reports from South Korea. On January 13 this year, Foreign Minister Byung-se Yun told a parliamentary hearing that “It is generally perceived from an international perspective that to erect statues in front of a foreign mission is not desirable.” On January 25, the Seoul regional court issued a “not guilty” verdict to Professor Yuha Park of Sejong University over a criminal defamation case filed on behalf of former comfort women over her book, Comfort Women of the Empire. Unfortunately, the prosecution appealed the case to a higher court, but it was refreshing to know that the Korean judiciary has the wisdom to see that a difference of views should be resolved through debate and not through state prosecution.

If patience, perseverance and the willingness to deepen mutual understanding allow the two countries to become closer on this issue, there remain at least two other issues that need direct attention. One is control of the Takeshima-Dokdo islets. While acknowledging that in Korea this has long been the most emotional issue against Japan, I believe that with sufficient humility on the Japanese side and Korean understanding of Japan’s readiness for co-existence, there is room to overcome this dispute. Another issue is the history of forced labor. Some Korean regional courts have ruled that the 1965 settlement of colonial claims by the two countries failed to resolve the fundamental unlawfulness of Japanese colonial rule, an argument that ran contrary to the views of both Seoul and Tokyo. At this point, neither Japanese firms nor the government have made any concessionary moves, waiting instead for the South Korean courts to quietly reverse their legal position.

China and History
Japan does not only face history issues with Korea; it also has problems with China. The territorial disputes around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands have a clear link to historical memory. In 1972, when China and Taiwan began claiming these islands, there was general understanding that the issue at stake was the question of oil in the sea off the islands, the

¹ On the comfort women issue after the fall of Park Geun-hye, see also my article in East Asia Forum: www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/02/09/the-comfort-women-issue-after-the-fall-of-park-geun-hye/
existence of which was reported in 1968. But after 40 years of de-facto “shelving” of the issue, China began sending coast guard ships into the area in September 2012 in order to prove sovereignty claims. Since then, the issue has been transformed almost exclusively into one of historical memory and justice. With Japanese coast guard ships sailing alongside Chinese ships, warning them to exit the territorial waters without firing a shot, the issue has deep security implications for Japan. But unless the idea of historical memory and historical justice related to the Senkakus can be resolved to mutual satisfaction, it is hard to imagine a solution.

In the last meeting between Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping at Hangzhou on Sept. 5, 2016, the two leaders agreed that negotiations to establish a crisis management mechanism have to be expedited. Under consideration is a long-overdue mechanism that could prevent direct clashes between the two countries, but reportedly progress has been hampered because both sides have been unable to find the necessary legal language needed to implement a working arrangement to cover the Senkaku Islands.

There is deadlock between the two countries. Since Japan’s diplomatic and security position deteriorated as a result of China’s “new status quo” position of entering into territorial waters as it wishes, Tokyo should do its best to resolve the situation. Abe’s fundamental policy is deterrence and dialogue, which is quite commendable. But in order to be effective, Abe needs to act decisively to change the new status quo. At this point, my proposal that Japan might shift away from state ownership and enter into ecological co-operation with China in order to resolve the issue without harming its position on sovereignty, is much too premature to attract any serious attention in Japan.2 The second history issue between Japan and China is the Yasukuni Shrine. After Abe’s visit in December 2013, the Four Points agreement reached by the two countries on Nov. 7, 2014, just prior to an APEC Summit, seems to have become the basis of the current, fragile status quo. Point No.2 in the agreement reads as follows: “Both sides shared some recognition that, following the spirit of squarely facing history and advancing toward the future, they would overcome political difficulties that affect their bilateral relations.” Here “political difficulties” signifies the issue of the Yasukuni Shrine; “some recognition” signifies that the Chinese and Japanese views naturally do not converge in full. The practical conclusion is that Abe will stay away from the shrine and so long as he stays away, China will not rock the boat. So far nothing ominous has happened to break this fragile status quo.

Campaign on History

Third, in addition to these two major issues, China seems to have started a holistic campaign to emphasize the scar of Japanese aggression and brutality toward China. The Chinese government seems to be disseminating this view as a way to show China’s moral superiority over Japan. Some examples of China’s “history war” against Japan are:

- The Chinese government submitted the case of the Nanjing Massacre to the UNESCO “Memory of the World” program in 2014; the submission was accepted in October 2015.
- On May 31, 2016, the Committee of International Union composed of eight countries and 14 organizations filed a new nomination on Comfort Women for registration in the UNESCO “Memory of the World” program. While the “Korean Council” plays an active part in this registry, professors at Shanghai Normal University are said to have taken the leadership of this nomination.2
- On Oct. 22, 2016, a statue of Chinese and Korean girls as comfort women was unveiled at Shanghai Normal University. The Historical Museum on Chinese Lanfu (a term for military prostitutes) was opened there on the same day. A special institute to study comfort women had already been opened at the university in 1999.
- In a different context, on Jan. 19, 2014, a Memorial Hall dedicated to Korean anti-Japanese fighter An Jung-geun was opened at the Harbin railway station on the site where An assassinated Hirobumi Ito in 1909.3 (Ito had been prime minister of Japan four times, but at the time he was killed was the colonial governor of Korea.) The Memorial Hall is said to be under renovation currently to double its size.4
- Last but not least, a “Research Center on the Tokyo Tribunal” was established in April 2012 at Shanghai Jiao Tong University.5 International symposiums were held in November 2013 and November 2016.

Unfortunately, these actions add a certain legitimacy and vigor to right-wing Japanese nationalists who have constantly warned about the danger of China’s history war. It also adds a certain sense of insecurity and helplessness to those who have argued for the path of humility. The latter may even include Prime Minister Abe, whose conciliatory speech in August 2015 on the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War followed the line set by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama’s 1995 apology for Japan’s wartime atrocities.

The US-Japan Approach

Finally, a word should be said about the United States, where there are also history issues. Among many achievements made by Abe on relations with the US, his visit to Washington in April 2015 was a particular success in expressing Japan’s contribution to all Americans who died in the war with Japan. Conversely, President Barack Obama’s visit to Hiroshima in May 2016 was an important step toward ultimate reconciliation between Japan and the United States, symbolizing Obama’s policy to create a world without nuclear weapons. From the point of view of Japan-US relations, Obama’s visit to Hiroshima strengthened Japanese feelings of respect toward America and desire for ultimate reconciliation. To reciprocate Obama’s initiative, Abe needed to visit Pearl Harbor before the end of Obama’s presidency. His December 2016 visit was another important step to express Japan’s humility toward those who died there. The exchanges of human sympathy at Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor offer an important lesson in how reconciliation can be achieved between two countries that do not share the same historical memory.

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6 Yaron Kaitoku, Aruyukon Kinenkangow Nihonbikukado (Korea: China is doubling the size of the An Jung-geun Memorial Hall), Sankei Shimbun, Oct. 29, 2015.
7 Chaojukogou Tokyo Sabban Kynkyogou Setsutsuihu (China to establish Research Center for Tokyo Tribunal), Sankei Shimbun, April 2, 2012.