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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DOMESTIC POLITICS AND TRILATERAL RELATIONS

A South Korean Perspective
Trilaterial Co-operation: the Devil’s in Domestic Politics

By Chung-in Moon & Won-young Hur

There are undoubtedly compelling strategic reasons for the US, Japan and South Korea to further strengthen their trilateral co-operation. But while Washington has pushed this agenda in the face of North Korea’s erratic and threatening behavior, Seoul and Tokyo have been unable to put to rest the specter of the comfort women issue and other tensions. There is worse to come, write Chung-in Moon and Won-young Hur, as the 2017 South Korean presidential election seems likely to erase any gains made in recent years.

TRILATERAL co-operation among Japan, South Korea and the US has long been taken for granted, largely because strategic interests have prevailed over partisan domestic political concerns. But recently, this norm is changing, at least in South Korea. While the US has maintained close bilateral alliances with both Japan and South Korea, the relationship between Japan and South Korea oscillates between co-operation and conflict marked by hyperbole and tension. Collective historical memories and a continuing territorial dispute have made the Seoul-Tokyo ties occasionally precarious and uncertain. This weak bilateral link has hindered American efforts to strengthen trilateral co-operation.

The Lee Myung-bak government, the most pro-American and pro-Japanese of recent governments, exemplified the hyperbolic nature of the relationship and the tremendous domestic pressures any leader faces in trying to change things. Cognizant of China’s rise and North Korean threats, President Lee made sincere efforts to improve relations with Japan by resolving the comfort women issue and signing the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan during his term. Lee was challenged in his efforts by the judiciary when the Constitutional Court ruled that “it is unconstitutional for the government to make no tangible effort to settle disputes with Japan over its refusal to compensate Korean women mobilized as sex slaves during its 1910-45 colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula.” Despite this pressure, he failed to resolve the issue with Japan. But he nearly succeeded in settling the GSOMIA in June 2012. In the face of enormous domestic opposition, however, he stopped short of signing the agreement.

Lee’s shifting attitudes on Japan also demonstrated great irony. Departing from his previous pro-Japanese stance, Lee paid an unexpected visit to the disputed Dokdo islands in August 2012, enraging Japan’s leaders and public. Just before the August 15 Independence Day, he also made remarks that were seen as improper about the Japanese emperor, saying that he “may come [to South Korea] if he is willing to apologize from his heart to those who died fighting for independence.” The remarks were viewed as inappropriate because the emperor has never officially expressed his intention to visit South Korea. Lee also made some disrespectful comments about Japan’s international reputation, saying “Japan’s influence in the international community isn’t what it used to be.” The shift in tone was a calculated political move to enhance his domestic popularity, but the consequences were grave, and Seoul-Tokyo relations hit rock-bottom; Washington’s efforts to strengthen trilateral co-operation hit a roadblock.

A Deeper Hole
It was against this backdrop that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had great expectations for President Park Geun-hye when she came into office in early 2013. Abe had maintained contact with Park before she ran for president, and their respective families had close ties, because Abe’s maternal grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, and Park’s father, Park Chung-hee, were good friends. But the high expectations were soon shattered as President Lee took a tough stance on Japan.

Her anti-Japanese sentiment surfaced in her first public speech on March 1, 2013, to commemorate the 94th anniversary of the March 1 anti-Japanese colonial movement: “Japan’s historical position as an assailant and Korea’s as a victim will not change even after 1,000 years pass away.” In her August 15 Independence Day speech, Park continued her hardline position by urging Japan to take steps to heal the pain of comfort women. The line got even stronger a year later, after Abe’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013. In her 2014 March 1 Day speech, she said the “pain of the 55 surviving comfort women should be healed. The more Japan denies past history, the more miserable Japan becomes, being driven into a corner.” Park also refused any formal summit with Abe, and Japan-South Korean bilateral ties remained crippled.

As with Lee Myung-bak, Park’s stance was politically motivated. She was trying to kill two birds with one stone, namely erasing her father’s pro-Japanese image, while enhancing her domestic political standing. It worked, and her domestic popularity soared. According to a poll conducted on Feb. 22, 2014, 67.7 percent of respondents supported her foreign-policy performance, and 63.7 percent of respondents with a conservative orientation endorsed her hardline stance on Japan. The domestic controversy over her father’s pro-Japan legacy faded away. But Abe was equally defiant. He showed no willingness to compromise on the comfort women issue, putting Japan and South Korea on a collision course. The administration of President Barack Obama was frustrated because the friction between its closest Asian allies undercut its “pivot to Asia” policy. Washington urged restraint and constructive dialogue on both sides. Tokyo responded positively, but Seoul was hesitant. Obama personally intervened and arranged a Japan-South Korean summit on the sidelines of the Japan-South Korea-US trilateral summit in March 2014, during the nuclear security summit at The Hague. Obama appealed to Park and Abe to put aside history and come up with a common stance on the North Korean nuclear problem. But Park’s position was firm: “A meaningful bilateral summit would not be conceivable unless the Japanese leadership shows a sincere attitude toward the resolution of the comfort women issue.”

Making Progress
Finally, Park began to relax her position in mid-2015. She hinted at the possibility of resolving the comfort women issue in an interview with the Washington Post on June 11, 2015. “There has been considerable...
progress in the comfort women issue and we are at the final stage of negotiation," she said.

American pressure had apparently worked. She needed to show signs of compromise ahead of a meeting with Obama in Washington on Oct. 17, 2015. During the visit, Obama further persuaded her to improve ties with Japan. On November 2, Park held her first summit talks with Abe, which was the first Japan-South Korean bilateral summit in three-and-a-half years; both leaders agreed to expedite the resolution of the comfort women issue.

Follow-up negotiations were fast and intensive, resulting in the Dec. 28, 2015, agreement. The official document, however, was not released, raising doubts about its contents. But at a press conference after signing the accord, Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio said that the Japanese government fully realized the responsibility it had for the deep pain and damaged honor and dignity of comfort women and that Abe, as prime minister of Japan, expressed a heartfelt apology and regrets to the victims. Fumio also revealed that the Japanese government would provide 1 billion yen (US$8.3 million) to help restore the honor and dignity of the survivors and heal their psychological scars through the establishment of a fund. Finally, he added that the accord will represent the "final and irrevocable" resolution of the comfort women issue.

South Korean foreign minister Byung-se Yun reaffirmed that the accord would be "final and irreversible," provided that Abe made the heartfelt apology and that the Japanese government donated the funds to compensate the victims of Japanese military slavery. In addition, he said, Seoul would take steps to relocate the statue of a girl representing former sex slaves standing in front of the Japanese Embassy and that it would refrain from criticizing and denouncing Japan over the issue at the United Nations and other international venues. Three factors explain the breakthrough. First, American pressure and mediation efforts worked. The Obama administration placed heavy pressure on both leaders to resolve the comfort women issue, while using diplomatic intervention to spur mediation between the two countries. Second, a back-channel talk between Byung-ki Lee, chief of staff to President Park, and Yachi Shitara, a foreign policy advisor and secretary general of the Japanese National Security Council, greatly facilitated the official negotiation process. Finally, there was a change in President Park’s strategic thinking. Amid mounting military threats from North Korea, her strategic interests prevailed over domestic politics. Moreover, her relatively high approval ratings at home fostered her shift.

The Obama administration was pleased. Secretary of State John Kerry praised the resolution of the issue, and National Security Advisor Susan Rice saw the accord as a crucial stepping stone toward “deepening our work with both nations … on the basis of mutual interests and shared values, as well as to advancing trilateral security co-operation.” Some State Department officials even compared its significance in ways that can both damage and improve ties with Japan-RoK-US trilateral co-operation. The establishment of a fund. Finally, he added that the accord will represent the “final and irrevocable” resolution of the comfort women issue. Some officials, however, felt that the accord was “a righteous outcome” that “would strengthen the capacity of Korea, Japan and the US in dealing with the common challenge of North Korea’s nuclear test,” during a phone conversation with Park on Jan. 7, 2016, after North Korea’s fourth nuclear test.

Judged by current politics, whoever gets elected as the new president is likely to renegotiate the accord in ways that can both further harm Seoul-Tokyo relations and damage Japan-RoK-US trilateral co-operation. The comfort women dispute illustrates how domestic politics complicate strategic calculations.

Domestic turbulence again
But the domestic political atmosphere in South Korea was quite different. Dissenting voices were fierce. The Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), a major opposition party, called the agreement a disgraceful act devoid of national consensus and called for an apology from Park and the immediate dismissal of Foreign Minister Yoon. It further argued that the Korean people would not accept it as the “final and irrevocable resolution of the comfort women issue” and that the agreement to relocate the "victim girl" statue represented shameful diplomacy. While the ruling Saenuri Party lobbied for the accord on the basis of national security interests, other opposition parties joined the DPK in denouncing the deal. According to a poll conducted on Jan. 8, 2016, Park’s negative approval rate extended by 7 percentage points. And only 26 percent of respondents supported the accord, while 56 percent opposed it. A full 72 percent of respondents believed the accord did not represent a sincere apology by the Japanese government and 58 percent supported re-negotiation. Civil society also rejected the deal. On Jan. 14, 2016, 383 NGOs and 355 social and intellectual leaders initiated a national campaign to boycott the December 28 accord. The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery in Seoul and the House of Sharing in Gwangju led the campaign. They pointed out that the Park government failed to secure Japan’s acknowledgement of its legal responsibility for the sexual slavery, and vehemently opposed the insertion of the expression, “final and irrevocable resolution” of the comfort women issue. Some dissenting victims even refused to accept monetary support from the fund.
Relocating the girl statue, which the Japanese government considers the most important reciprocal measure for the donation of 1 billion yen, also remains a thorny issue. Seoul Mayor Won Soon Park refused to relocate the statue by supporting the NGO position. As a protest against the accord, a citizen group in Busan city erected another girl statue in front of the Japanese Consulate there on Dec. 28, 2016, the first anniversary of the accord. A furious Abe recalled Japan’s ambassador to Seoul and the consul-general in Busan back to Tokyo and suspended bilateral negotiations on a currency swap. For Abe, the Busan action was tantamount to an outright breach of trust. With Park Geun-hye by now mired in a corruption scandal and impeachment proceedings, the South Korean government became helpless, Japan-South Korean relations drifted and prospects for deeper trilateral co-operation dimmed.

No Good News
Worse is to come. All South Korean presidential candidates are calling for the invalidation of the accord and renegotiation. Jae-in Moon, the former president of the DPK and now the front-runner in the 2017 presidential race, contended that the accord is invalid as it was not ratified by the National Assembly. Even Acting President and Prime Minister Gyo-ahn Hwang, who had emerged as a leading conservative candidate, admitted that “the accord was the result of our government’s incompetence.” Judged by current politics, whoever gets elected is likely to renegotiate the accord in ways that can both further harm Seoul-Tokyo relations and damage Japan-RoK-US trilateral co-operation. The comfort women dispute illustrates how domestic politics complicate strategic calculations.

GSOMIA, which is designed to facilitate the flow of military information by assuring its secure storage and management, could encounter a similar fate. The US was pushing Japan and South Korea to finalize it because such an agreement would strengthen a more integrated missile defense system involving the three countries. Japan has wanted to conclude it because military information-sharing with Seoul would allow Tokyo to respond to North Korean missile threats more effectively. Albeit, realizing its military utility, the domestic backlash against the Lee government’s aborted attempt made the Park Geun-hye government at first hesitant to sign it. Opposition parties were negative about GSOMIA with Japan not only because of its contribution to Japan’s military rise, but also because of China’s critique of Seoul’s participation in the US-led theater missile defense. But as North Korea undertook a series of provocative acts such as two nuclear tests and the test-launch of a missile, the Park government began to expedite GSOMIA negotiations with Japan. To the surprise of the public, South Korea and Japan signed the agreement on Nov. 23, 2016, less than 30 days after the resumption of negotiations. It could be seen as Park’s last gift to Obama before his term ended.

Domestic opposition was formidable. In the National Assembly, 131 members of the opposition bloc immediately proposed a special law invalidating the agreement. They argued that it is illegitimate because it did not go through the assembly for ratification, and inappropriate because Park, who was undergoing impeachment, was not qualified to accept the deal. NGOs also called for its suspension, claiming “we cannot recognize the agreement which was done by the incompetent and illegitimate Park government that totally ignored the National Assembly and the people.” The accord is to be annually renewed, which is unlikely to go well if one of the opposition candidates gets elected president.

As the recent course of Japan-South Korea relations illustrates, the devil is in domestic politics. Partisan domestic interests trump strategic interests. The case of comfort women and GSOMIA eloquently exemplifies how trilateral co-operation is being held hostage to South Korea’s polarized politics. Although South Korea is a relatively small country, centrifugal forces emanating from its domestic politics can occasionally outweigh centripetal forces coming from the outer security environment. As neo-classical realists contend, international structure matters, but domestic politics can matter more.

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